

Digital archives of feelings: affective politics of wartime photoblogging
Adi Kuntsman, RICC, The University of Manchester adi.kuntsman@manchester.ac.uk

Paul Virilio reminds us that the world of cyberspace is shaped by accelerated speed. In cyberspace – and in today’s increasingly digitalised environments, more broadly – information, words and feelings can circulate momentarily and instantaneously, creating, as he suggests, the sense of confusion and loss of orientation (as well as information overload, apathy and indifference). As an ethnographer of Internet cultures, I see this instantaneity everywhere around me: in floods of data on search engines, in virtual flashmobs, in mobile social networks or tweets, to mention just very few. However, as I learnt through several years of ethnographic research in on-line social spaces, speed and circulation are only part of the picture: texts, images and records of interactions, quick and shifty as they are, do not disappear into oblivion. In dialogue with Virilio, I want to emphasise that speed and circulation in today’s digital cultures co-exist with extensive documentation and preservation; turning digitalised feelings, interactions and events into what I call ‘virtual fossils’ – frozen in on-line archives that remain on servers for years. Archaeological artefacts of the present, they can hold still for long periods of time, and are often forgotten (sometimes as soon as the next day, buried under layers of newer materials and updates). And yet, they always have the possibility of re-emerging in circulation, open to modification, appropriation, cross-examination or erasure.

Although no archive is ever finished or accurate, digital archives generate particularly intense cultural anxieties regarding authenticity, truth, origins, reproducibility and transmission. It is these anxieties that will be at the centre of my paper, which looks at violence and warfare on the Russian-language blogging social network, Live Journal. LiveJournal (www.livejournal.com), one of many blogging platforms that was developed in the last decade, is particularly popular among Russian-speaking Internet users (in Russia and in Russian-speaking diasporas across the globe); to the extent that it is seen as *the* Russian blogosphere. Unlike other blogging platforms that offer stand-alone blogs, Live Journal is networked (in a way, it is a predecessor of social networking sites – the blogs are interlinked through a system of ‘friending’ – subscription to other blogs; building each blogger’s news feed, but also allowing degrees of access from public to friends only, to private). Live Journal is also interactive: each blogging entry has its own discussion space that functions like a bulletin board, allowing threads of comments and debates – a feature that is not particularly popular among English-speaking users, but is widely used in the Russian-language blogosphere. Some blogging entries get dozens to hundreds of comments (and sometimes even over a thousand), thus transforming the idea of blogging as citizen journalism or personal diary to blogging as interactive social space.

The Russian-language blogosphere is not simply networked; it has its own celebrities – bloggers who have more than a thousand subscribers, and who are widely read and discussed across the Internet and even in the print media. The photoblog that is at the centre of my discussion is one of such celebrities, in fact, it is considered as ‘the most popular blog’ in Russian LiveJournal. Run by a journalist Rustem Adagamov, the blog had just under 30.000 subscribers when I began my ethnography a year and a half ago; now their number exceeds 40.000. Described by its author as ‘an illustrated blog about everything’, the blog consists of daily entries (and often more than one a day) on a wide range of topics, from

Russian and international politics, to wars, natural disasters, ecology, fashion, technology and more. Containing minimal textual information, the entries are predominantly based on photographs, taken by various news agencies and sometimes by Adagamov himself. Many entries, in particularly those on controversial, political topics, generate hundreds to thousands of comments, where the discussion often develops into raging fights between the readers.

My larger project, of which this paper is a small part, focuses on the digital life of war and conflict. Following blogs, social networking sites and on-line discussion forums, I examine frames of visibility and invisibility of human suffering and the differential distribution of humanisation and recognition – whose pain was put into circulation and who was made invisible (or was questioned as inauthentic); who was positioned as a victim or an enemy monster.

So when studying Adagamov's photoblog and its audience, I was paying particular attention to the many entries about wars and conflicts, such as those about recent warfare in Georgia, Chechnya, the West Bank and Gaza. What interested me was how photographs of violent political events, published and discussed in his blog, became what Ann Cvetkovich coins 'archives of feelings'. Cvetkovich argues that cultural texts are 'repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception'. So what kinds of practices surround Adagamov's photoblog, which is in itself a weird hybrid of self-publishing and virtual agora; a journalistic enterprise and a private diary; a supposedly impartial reportage 'about everything' and a brave – or merely provocative – critical voice of Russian digital mediascape? What kind of affective regimes – of love, hate, rage, fear, suspicion, compassion – do these photoblogging entries and discussions produce, and why? Instead of analysing photoblogs as representations or even narratives of particular events, I want to focus my attention on the *feelings* through which the photographs are constituted as documents, and ask: what kind of documents are they?

In the short time that I have left, I would like to briefly present several, rather characteristic, blogging entries on the topic of warfare. The first one is about the Russian-Georgian conflict in August 2008. During the military actions in Georgia, Adagamov published daily entries, sometimes more than one a day, relating to various aspects of this war. There were photos of the injured civilians and armed soldiers; sites of destruction and daily lives in the warzone. Among them were several photos of Russian soldiers in the Georgian town of Gori, published on 14-08-08. The caption reads: 'Russian army patrol stops a car, transporting weapons'. The entry gathered over a thousand comments. The first one stated: 'The photograph with the Georgian guy on the ground can be used to create a report on "Russian militants terrorise civilian population in Gori"'. Another commentator, later in the thread, asked 'And where exactly are the weapons? They are ripping clothes off an old Georgian man, there are no signs of weapons whatsoever'. 'Hahaha', someone responded to this comment, 'and now they are going to take his underwear as well, and rape him)))'. These and other comments each build an affective relationship with the narrative of wartime photography as a story of human suffering: some empathise with the attacked man whose life is in the hand of several armed soldiers; but many others excitedly sexualise and celebrate the violence. And yet

others make the report as an object – and a generator – of suspicion, by imagining its ‘misuse’ for propaganda.

A similar type of blogging entries and discussions took place during Israel’s warfare in Gaza, in December 2008- January 2009 – another conflict that was addressed extensively in Agadamov’s blog throughout the duration of military operations. In his blog he reported almost daily about the events in Israel/Palestine, frequently posting images of death and destruction, as well as photographs of soldiers and politicians. These entries, too, generated hundreds of comments, in which empathy and compassion were mixed with anger, mockery, hatred and suspicion. For example, one of the many pro-Israeli bloggers wrote that this photograph of the wounded girl has been staged and photoshopped, in order to appear more dramatic and manipulate the feelings of international audiences.

Another entry on the Gaza war, dated 01-01-09, describes the assassination of one of Hamas senior officials, Nizar Rayyan, in Israeli airstrike. The airstrike also killed his wife and eight children. The photos show Rayyan himself and the site of bombing. In the discussion that unfolded in the comments section, the assassination of Rayyan and the overall military operation was largely celebrated: ‘The bastard deserved it’, wrote one person, ‘Good news, thank you’, wrote another. The main object of compassion in the discussion were not those depicted in the photos or left just outside of it, like the bodies of Rayyan’s family members, but the *Israelis* who were presented as victims of Palestinian terrorism. The deaths of Rayyan’s family members were also mourned by some, but presented as inevitable and even necessary by others. In response to the accusations of Israel’s killing of children, one blogger wrote: ‘there are no “children” there, only little bandits, used by grown-up bandits in a media-war. The more little bandits are killed now, the less grown-up bandits will need to be killed later’.

These and other responses are striking examples of what Eithne Lubheid calls ‘unequal regimes of living and dying’ and what Judith Butler describes as differential distribution of life and death that produces grievable and un-grievable lives. But what is more interesting – and disturbing – than these celebrations of death and destruction, is the regime of suspicion that structured many responses in the blog. Wartime photoblogging – and to some extent, the broader practice of citizen journalism – do almost the opposite of what they aim to be doing- which is reporting, observing, informing. As a brief glance at these blogging entries demonstrates, blogging posts about violence and warfare are constituted in the discussions not only and not so much as documentations of the actual events. Instead, they become documents that map affective flows – of suspicion (the photograph is not what it seems, it can/should/will be used as deception); of compassion, hatred, rage, indifference, or joy. These flows constitute and challenge various notions of humanness and practices of dehumanisation; they form connections and ruptures across the transnational Russian-language blogosphere, which includes those living in Russia and those in former Soviet republics which are now independent states (such as Georgia); Russian expatriates living abroad, and Russian-speaking immigrants, settled across the world (including a large Russian-Jewish community in Israel/Palestine). These connections and ruptures is a whole different story, which I address elsewhere, just to mention briefly that I am trying to think about the Russian-language blogosphere as a diaspora space, where notions of location, ‘here and away’, belonging and erasure are intimately intertwined with digital networks and

with everyday experiences of attachment and alienation that work along or across geopolitical borders.

But what I would like to come back to now is blogging as documents of affect. I am interested in the very nature of digital archives as cultural artefacts, but also in the practice of ethnographic research in – and with – such archives. Here it is important to address the emotional intensity of working with such documents – intensity that is often discounted in visions of on-line ethnography because the latter is assumed to be distanced, dis-embodied, not-engaged. (It isn't, of course!)

During the years of working on violence in and out of cyberspace, I was trying to think about the effects of violent words and images, as they circulate on- and off-line. It was not just the witnessing of military violence as it was represented, or of performative verbal violence as it was enacted by the participants. So the language of narrative or representation is insufficient here; and so is the idea of performativity of on-line texts. Rather, what seemed to have a profound effect on many Internet users (and on me as an ethnographer) was the ways violence can reverberate in and out of cyberspace, and how it can be intensified and transformed in digital circulation and repetition; moving between contexts, blogs, comments, webpages, and computer windows, flooding us with words, and at times, leaving us speechless. This reverberation has its own affective energy that transcends individual texts, bodies and technologies, while at the same time intimately tying them together.

Digital archives of feelings, then, can be seen as anchors of affect, which is both psychically intense and politically charged. I would like to conclude my brief journey into wartime photoblogging with several questions, which, I believe, are crucial to thinking about digital archives as objects of politics and research. What happens to these digital archives of feelings as they turn into virtual fossils, archived in blogosphere, buried under layers of new materials, updates and events? What happens to their haunting capture of lives, already gone? Can these haunted documents become a form of future memory and commemoration of those from whom humanness and the right to life are denied both physically and discursively? Can digital archives of war and violence really act as (future) testimony – and what *is* the status of testimony, 'evidence' and reportage in the age of digital reproduction anyway? In the medium of the Internet, where any material can be copied, removed, reinstated, or modified; and where texts and images are constantly figured and refigured as 'neutral data', 'truthful testimony', 'outrageous deception' or 'just a joke', what can digital archives of feelings really stand for?