

## **Christine Borgman on Online Communication and Change in Central and Eastern Europe**

by Kirk St. Amant

The fall of the Soviet Union led to the creation of a series of new states that had once been republics of the old USSR, and facilitated access to Eastern Block nations. Many of these nations, including Ukraine, Latvia, Uzbekistan, Georgia, and others, had their own languages and their own unique cultures, but 75 years of Soviet domination had deprived many westerners of access to these cultures or interaction with individuals from these regions. As a result, much of the literature on culture and communication remains limited in its discussion and description of the cultures and peoples of this region.

Online communication technologies, however, are allowing us to interact with these areas once again, and on a scale never before thought possible. This new online access, however, has also brought a series of changes in how these cultures interact both with the West and with one another. An effective discussion of this situation can be found in chapter 9 of Christine L. Borgman's book *From Gutenberg to the Global Information Infrastructure: Access to Information in the Networked World* (MIT Press, 2000).

Borgman begins this chapter by noting that, "The twenty-first century promises ubiquitous networks, ubiquitous computing, and ubiquitous information" (p. 225). She goes on to note how factors of economics, culture, and technology will all affect how well individuals from different cultures and regions will be able to use these new networks in order to make use of the information they contain. Access is, essentially, a case of global "haves" versus global "have nots," for effective online access requires working infrastructures, reasonable connection speeds and costs, and reasonable learning curves for new technologies.

As a result, most of the world's industrialized nations have been able to make use of the new information infrastructure while the developing nations need to address one or more of the aspects related to effective online access. To illustrate how these factors are affecting the developing world, Borgman uses examples from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Borgman begins her discussion by explaining how the nations of CEE provide a rare opportunity to examine, "the relationship between political, economic, and cultural traditions related to information and the use of information technologies for access to information" (p. 244). This opportunity for study is related to the fact that these countries, which were once cut off from the rest of the world, began large-scale investment in telecommunication networks soon after the fall of the USSR. The result was a region that went from several decades of highly controlled/limited information access to an environment of highly open and uncontrolled information access in less than ten years.

Borgman explains that this transition has not been easy. A lack of high-capacity communication lines in the region continues to restrict network growth. However, the governments and the private sectors of many of these nations realize that the development of such networks is essential to business development in the new information economy. The process then becomes cyclical: access to the online environment creates access to new international markets, which allow for increased overall earnings that can then be used to improve the quality of online access in a region to increase access to international markets, and so on as the cycle repeats.

The development of this new information infrastructure also created a series of interesting cultural situations in this region. First, in the nations of CEE, publicly available information had historically been so greatly mixed with Communist propaganda that the average citizen did not trust it. The result was a society in which information was not valued highly. As a result, one of the greatest challenges facing CEE is educating citizens on how to correctly value information so it can be used for effective decision making.

In other cases, the demands of the new information society conflicted with traditional economic practices. For example, under the Communist system, individuals in CEE were, essentially, guaranteed employment, regardless of if they actually worked or not and regardless of whether or not they and their services were actually needed by an organization.

The fast-moving globalized economy, however, cannot accommodate such a surplus of unnecessary labor. In fact, such a surplus of labor (especially labor that does no real work that benefits the organization) is contradictory to economic success in a networked world where rapid and flexible organizations stand to benefit the most. As a result, the nations of CEE also need to re-think their perspectives on employment practices and company-employee (as well as state-employee) relationships if companies in those nations wish to benefit fully from information technologies.

Moreover, under the old Communist systems of CEE, success in one's job was often closely linked to political affiliation and party activities. The cyber economy, however, is driven largely by technical skills, and success under these economic conditions often means having technicians who know the systems and the related technologies well. It is these individuals who gain the power and the privilege in an organization, for their skills are essential for the organization to survive. The result is a shift to employment-success models based on what one knows.

Perhaps the most shocking cultural change to affect this region, though, is the shift in "power languages" from Russian to English. Under Soviet domination, Russian was the language one needed to know to succeed economically, educationally, or politically.

The language of network technology, and the language of online commerce, has become English. As a result, CEE citizens who wish to use the software essential to effective online communication, as well as have access to the support and service related to those products, need to know English (the language of the programmer and the related support personnel).

Similarly, CEE citizens who wish to engage in international online business need to rely increasingly on English as an international commercial language in order to advertise their products or provide services via online media. The result is not only a shift in the "language of power" but also a shift in who has economic power. Those who speak English well or can teach English become essential to international economic success in the globalized marketplace.

These factors are but a few of the concepts mentioned by Borgman in chapter 9 of her book, but they do help the reader realize how communication networks are changing the ways in which the rest of the world is developing. For this reason, chapter 9 of Borgman's book is a wonderful resource for individuals interested in online interaction with individuals from other nations, especially individuals interested in CEE.

By reviewing the ideas and examples Borgman presents in this chapter, individuals can gain an effective understanding both of how communication networks are changing international relations and how those same networks are changing relations within individuals nations.

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