How Not to Network a Nation

Information Policy
edited by Sandra Braman

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How Not to Network a Nation

The Uneasy History of the Soviet Internet

Benjamin Peters

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

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This book was set in Stone by the MIT Press. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Peters, Benjamin, 1980- author.
Title: How not to network a nation : the uneasy history of the Soviet internet / Benjamin Peters.
Description: Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, [2015] | Series: The information policy | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2015038371 | ISBN 9780262034180 (hardcover : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Computer networks—Soviet Union—History. | Internetworking (Telecommunication)—Research—Soviet Union—History.
Classification: LCC TK5102.3.S68 P48 2015 | DDC 384.30947/09045—dc23
LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015038371

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Joli Jensen, Michael Schudson, Fred Turner, Gary Browning
Four mentors at four schools

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Series Editor's Introduction

Sandra Braman

In this first-ever book-length treatment of early Soviet intelligent network design history, Benjamin Peters uses uncanniness as a method. He makes use, that is, of the disorientation that results when the familiar is encountered in an unfamiliar context, broadening and deepening what we believe that we know about the familiar. This can be a dangerous endeavor. Avatar designers and others fear the "uncanny valley"—where the nonhuman is so close to the human that the difference cannot be discerned—because that is literally too close for viewer/user comfort. "That's different," they say in those cultures with traditional concerns about trolls, those who look like people but in fact are not.

Historically, the uncanny "other" was supernatural and not necessarily to be trusted with matters of this world. For Peters, the "other" is the Soviet Union. What he found is based on original multilingual archival research and oral interviews with those who were involved in the design processes. Peters describes what he sees as the capitalist features of the Soviet world that undermined its networking efforts and what he views as the socialist characteristics of the United States that produced the Internet. On the face of it, this suggests deep contradictions within capitalist and socialist systems that belie the claimed and apparent differences between the two blocs. But even those concerned with cybersecurity acknowledge that it can be difficult to identify the "other" in the network environment. What was the uncanny valley in this analytical zone?

For those who think about the information economy, differences between the East and West are indiscernible. Cristiano Antonelli's (1992) seminal insights into the nature of the information economy, in which cooperation and coordination are as important as—or more important than—competition for long-term economic success were inductively developed from

detailed studies of the practices and activities of transnational corporations on both sides of the iron curtain (many funded by the unfortunately short-lived United Nations Center on Transnational Corporations). What Peters presents as counterintuitive actually provides further evidence of the transition to a global information economy in which ideological differences may still provide motivations but not explanations. Work of this kind, which looks across political environments, is particularly valuable as we struggle to make policy for a world in which network politics is genuinely global even though state-centric geopolitical distinctions remain.

Theoretical pluralism has been familiar since the 1980s, but on reading Peters one suddenly realizes that most of those who take such an approach tend to prefer particular types of causal probability even as they roam across theories and disciplines. Peters is not only interdisciplinary but also travels across the levels and qualities of the likelihood that any given causal factor will be determinative in a given circumstance. In this history of early Soviet network design efforts, Peters ranges from unpacking institutional rigidities that did successfully shape knowledge production and use to focusing attention on contingencies that can radically affect ultimate outcomes. His heterarchical approach to policy analysis importantly reminds us of the need to examine the interplay among decision-making processes as well as among players. And Peters returns again and again to the centrality of ideas in policymaking, devoting a full chapter to the history of cybernetics in the Soviet Union during the period covered.

Oddly, according to the *OED*, the notion of the "uncanny" came into written use a century before the word "canny" was seen. This may be an artifact of the processes by which materials survive, but it is still interesting. Peters's multilingual archival research and oral interviews with individuals involved in the Soviet efforts have yielded a picture of network conceptualization and decision-making processes fascinating not only in their own right but also for what they offer to those who study and live with intelligent networks in other parts of the world. We *are* the other, in the global network. With this book, Peters deepens our ken of networks—a fundament of information policy since at least the 1830s and the telegraph—and brings their study into the next generation.