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Communicating community: Early Internet and trans* digital cultures in Ukraine and beyond

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Abstract

This article explores the interrelation between the lives and politics of trans* people in former Soviet countries and the development of the Internet. I argue that while there were possibilities for communication and connection for trans* people during Soviet times, the arrival of the Internet expanded these possibilities. Turning to media archaeology as a methodology, I investigate how early versions of the Internet shaped (digital) trans* communities and how these communities influenced knowledge production. I show that early Internet trans* users were involved in collaborative mutual aid practices that were fostered by the digital cultures of the time, Internet architecture, and earlier offline cultures. Focusing on a case study from Ukraine, the article highlights how trans* Internet users were (and continue to be) active contributors to global knowledge production and medical and technological innovation, fostering a collective ethos vital for trans* communities. I also point to the impact of the Internet's evolution and geopolitical changes on contemporary trans* communities.

Keywords: digital cultures; transsexuality; transgender epistemologies; net histories; Ukraine; USSR

1 Introduction

This article aims to start a conversation on how the lives and politics of trans*[1] people in ex-Soviet countries responded to, informed and shaped the development of the Internet. How did the early versions of the Internet shape trans* communities? How did trans* people, in turn, shape knowledge production and organising on the Internet? Finally, how do the

[1] My use of 'trans*' is in line with Blas Radi's (2019, p. 45) suggestion to use it not as a homogenising term but 'as a way of evoking a multiplicity that is not limited to trans* women and men, but rather includes all those identities whereby a person does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth'. At the same time, I use 'transgender', 'transsexual', 'transvestite' etc. to reflect historical practices of self-identification. The citations are left unchanged and may contain 'trans' without an asterisk.

changes in the Internet as a media and the (geo)political shifts influencing Internet regulation affect online trans* cultures today? Based on an analysis of early digital trans* cultures, I argue that while the Internet was 'spreading' from the West to the East, and the ex-Soviet states were integrating into the global information network, trans* people in the region were actively involved in shaping the Internet. Via the Internet, they were not just 'integrating' into globalised trans* identity discourses. They were also creating virtual and real-life strategies for making liveable lives and developing various fields of knowledge in a collective process of experimentation.

This article builds upon academic knowledge created within trans* studies and media archaeology. It is important to remember that the studies *of* trans* people greatly outnumber studies written *by* trans* people within both of these disciplines (see Ratkowska-Pasikowska & Okólska, 2022). This complex history of academic knowledge production is reflected and discussed in trans* studies. Andrea Long Chu and Emmet Harsin Drager (2019, p. 113) describe trans* studies as 'medical, cultural, aesthetic, and political theory that has come about since the creation of transsexual and transgender as identity categories in the mid-twentieth century'. While recognising Susan Stryker and Sandy Stone as important theorists in trans* studies, they also (2019, p. 113) point out that the most cited texts within trans* studies were written by people who were not trans*: sexologists and clinicians such as Harold Garfinkel, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Harry Benjamin; feminist theorists like Janice Raymond and Donna Haraway; queer scholars such as Gayle Salamon, Heather Love, and Marcia Ochoa. As noted by Cassius Adair, Cameron Awkward-Rich and Amy Marvin (2020, p. 313), 'we cannot know what trans studies might have been (and might yet be) had trans academics laboured under less hostile conditions'.

Trans* studies have also been criticised for focusing only on privileged and 'Western'-centric experiences (see, for example, Laidlaw & Stirrett, 2023). When we turn to more local discussions, we may find that the ideas on gender variance in Central and Eastern Europe produced in academia have been influenced by the 'Western'-centric epistemic system. This system associates countries in the CEE (Central and Eastern Europe) region with a process of eternal 'development' and 'transition' (see an analysis of these processes in Gressgård & Husakouskaya, 2020). Yet there has been an increase in studies that have turned to local histories and theories of gender variance, providing a more nuanced perspective and often written from a queer/trans* standpoint. Among the most recent works are studies by Jūratė Juškaitė (2017), Nadzeya Husakouskaya (2018), Maria Dębińska (2020), Yana Kirey-Sitnikova (2020; 2024), Bojan Bilić, Iwo Nord and Aleksa Milanović (2022), Zhanar Sekerbayeva (2023), and Rebeka Põldsam and Sara Arumetsa (2023). These studies engage not just in the study of transsexual/transgender/trans* phenomena but also of the complex East/West dynamics surrounding these phenomena.

Many of the studies listed above mention in passing the importance of the Internet for trans* people. The development of the Internet is connected to the historical development of contemporary trans* communities, as the Internet enabled people to connect with each other, provide support and exchange information. While ten years ago, scholars noted 'the relative absence of studies of transgender phenomena in relation to [...] new media' (Aizura & Stryker, 2013, p. 10), this situation has somewhat changed. The role that the Internet plays in trans* lives and politics is now not just mentioned but studied in depth. In articles with titles like 'I Did It All Online' (Cavalcante, 2016) and books with titles like *Digital Me* (Nicolazzo et al., 2022), online communities are studied as 'counterpublics' and

'care structures' (Cavalcante, 2016) for trans* people. And yet, while the study of trans* digital cultures is growing, conceptualisations of the Internet often lack a focus on technological materiality.

What does it mean to take the technological materiality of the Internet seriously? For some, it means turning to media archaeology as a methodology and intellectual orientation to bring the Internet from the 'background' to the 'forefront' of analysis. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (2011, p. 253) emphasise the value of media archaeology in exposing 'the technicality of media not to reduce culture to technology but to reveal the techno-epistemological momentum in culture itself'. Media archaeology is committed to an interdisciplinary 'spirit of curiosity and intellectual radicality' (Parikka, 2013, p. 161).

Given the transdisciplinary orientation of media archaeology, it is not surprising that it proves to be useful for researchers working on gender heterogeneity. An important recent study in this regard is 'The Two Revolutions: A History of the Transgender Internet' (2023) by Avery Dame-Griff. The study delves into alternative net histories and the interrelated histories of trans* communities, focusing on the US context. Such in-depth study is still lacking when we turn to research on other regions.

Turning to media archaeology as methodology, this article bridges the studies of the Internet with trans* studies, focusing on a specific period (the 1990s and early 2000s), specific media (early Internet versions and the World Wide Web that came later), specific communities (transsexual communities, as well as trans* networks more broadly), and specific region (the ex-Soviet countries, and Ukraine in particular). But this article is meant to prompt further thinking and call for more academic and activist conversations that would take technology and trans* solidarity seriously.

In this article, I will sometimes engage with experiences and studies from the broader CEE region when pointing to the transnational character of the Internet. I will also use 'ex-Soviet' when referring to the countries that once were part of the Soviet Union. My implicit focus in this article is on Ukraine, and the Ukrainian context will be my anchoring point throughout the article. I believe that focusing on Ukraine helps uncover valuable net histories and is important in the current political moment. At the same time, the limited focus of the article excludes many other digital experiences and histories carved in other languages and connected to other countries.

The first section of the article will delve into the technologies of communication and knowledge production used by trans* people in the USSR before the development of the Internet. I will then present a brief history of the Internet development and trans* participation in it, with a focus on communities and mutual aid. The third section will present a case study of community work and a personal website by Lena from Kyiv. I will locate this within the broader discussion of the early trans* websites and networks, in particular, *Usenet* and *GeoCities* platforms. Finally, in conclusion, I will turn to the current moment and discuss how (geo)politics and technology affect trans* communities.

For this study, I used community archives as a source of information: newsgroups, mailing lists, and websites that have ceased to exist yet were archived by the Internet Archive, Google Groups and Oocities.org project. While these sources were public, the personal information included in them raises questions about digital research ethics (Adair, 2019; Dame-Griff, 2023, pp. 21–22). Therefore, in the article, I use only first names when referring to or citing the trans* users and do not include citations to individual archived home pages or mail threads to limit the overall visibility of these sources.

2 Transsexuality in the Soviet Union

From the time of the Russian empire and through the Soviet Union modernisation campaigns, one can trace the history of gender regulation as a history of colonial and Orientalist practices. These practices were the shadow of the modern idea of the Soviet subject. While Soviet gender regulation is often thought about in terms of women's emancipation, gender crossing did not fit with the model of the new Soviet man or woman. It was often criminalised – in particular, in the Soviet republics that were considered backwards and peripheral by the 'central' Russian regime, such as the republics of Central Asia (see Aripova, 2022). At the same time, gender transgression and gender variance have been discussed in Soviet medical circles since the 1920s, and the concepts of 'hermaphroditism', 'transvestism' and 'transsexualism' appeared and developed in the Soviet Union as modern, medicalised phenomena (see Husakouskaya, 2018; Kirey-Sitnikova, 2020).

The interest in sex and gender identity was most prevalent in the fields of Soviet psychiatry, sexology and endocrinology. Dan Healey (2021, p. 34) notes the 'unruly appropriation' of European sexological ideas in early Soviet sexology, as well as the 'sifting' of European and local knowledge 'for what it could offer to the project of communist modernisation with its notes of internal colonisation'. The field of sexopathology appeared in the 1960s, and in the 1970s–80s included research on sex changes for transsexuals. Aron Belkin from Moscow's Institute of Psychiatry and Irina Golubeva from the Institute of Experimental Endocrinology and Hormone Chemistry were some of the few Soviet researchers working on transsexuality. In Soviet Russia, they diagnosed trans* people and helped them in their 'adaptation' (meaning the adaptation of the person to life in society in their desired gender role). Belkin followed the theories of Harry Benjamin, the German-American endocrinologist and sexologist and the author of the influential *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966). While the opinions of Soviet and foreign researchers differed about the causes of 'transsexualism' (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2020), they agreed on it being a pathology, a condition that could be cured through hormonal and surgical medical interventions, as well as through legal (documental change) and social 'adaptation'.

The Soviet attempts at sex change surgeries in the 1920s were not successful (see Healey, 2001, pp. 165–170); yet in the 1960–70s, Irina Golubeva, in collaboration with Belkin, performed successful sex change surgeries for intersex and transsexual patients (Healey, 2017, p. 104). In Latvia, Viktors Kalnbērzs performed similar operations in the early 1970s, and there are also records of the surgeries being carried out for transsexual men in 1980s Estonia (Põldsam & Arumetsa, 2023, p. 6). However, the official diagnosis of 'transsexualism' appeared in the Soviet Union only in 1983, and the guidelines for doctors developed by Aron Belkin were published in 1991.

Within the Soviet Union, there were not many sources from which those who did not feel aligned with their assigned gender could get information. Trans* people had to become activist scholars by doing their own research and reading medical volumes that could be borrowed from a library or accessed otherwise. The transsexual activist Lena from Kyiv compiled a list of several hundred titles while carrying out personal research in the late 1980s (Juškaitė, 2017, p. 11). Likewise, Kristel from Estonia searched for information in the library and even requested materials on transsexuality from the library of Johns Hopkins University in the USA (Põldsam & Arumetsa, 2023, p. 9). Foreign materials

were an important source of knowledge, although access to them was very limited. In the late 1980s, local newspaper articles and TV shows (sometimes of a sensationalist nature) would occasionally present information on transsexuality or transvestism, and it is through these materials that people would find out about the possibility of presenting or living otherwise (see Juškaitė, 2017, pp. 30–33).

The possibilities for trans* communication during late Soviet times existed through informal underground trans* circles or friendships, although finding other trans* people was often a matter of luck, especially in smaller towns or villages. Broader underground communities (such as gay or lesbian circles), and self-published print media could also facilitate connections – both locally and internationally. For instance, the print journal *Forumo in Esperanto* was published by the Ligo de Samseksamaj Geesperantistoj (League of Homosexual Gay Esperantists).[2] Among other topics, the journal published materials on gay life in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It also provided ads for pen pals, the majority of which came from Eastern Europeans.

One can find evidence of international communication and connections in grassroots trans*-produced publications in the US, UK and Western Europe. The grassroots *DRAG Queens* magazine (News, 1971, p. 9) included information about a document obtained from the Soviet embassy describing nine 'sex conversion operations' performed in 1967–68; the Institute of Experimental Endocrinology is also mentioned. In a letter published in the *Everywoman* UK feminist grassroots magazine, American transgender activist Angela Douglas (1971, p. 12) described her joy at obtaining a document about the surgeries performed in the USSR. The Soviet account of the surgeries was proof of actual transsexual people existing in the USSR, and the fact that these surgeries were free of charge in the USSR was leveraged by the US trans* activists like Douglas. Douglas shared the document with US doctors and organisations involved in transsexual research and claimed that this step fostered international communication between researchers (1971, pp. 12–13). In the 1980s, US-printed pamphlets featured lists of doctors in foreign countries who treated transsexuals (List of Doctors in Foreign Countries Who Treat Transsexuals, 1980). These lists included contact details of doctors in the USSR, which points to the exchange of knowledge that happened 'through' the Iron Curtain.

However, it was only with the start of the *glasnost* period of the late 1980s that trans* people in the USSR could easily find each other and create local and international connections. The first interview with a Russian transsexual woman, Svetlana, carried out by a Latvian transsexual activist, Elga, in 1990, and published in the grassroots *International TranScript* magazine in 1992, was tellingly entitled 'Glasnost' (Remes, 1992). In it, Svetlana talked about the support she received from Irina Golubeva but also about the discrimination she endured from family members and doctors, including forced psychiatric treatment.

With borders slowly opening, local community organising and face-to-face international visits also became a reality. Põldsam and Arumetsa (2023, p. 6) mention the effect of the interview with the surgeon Viktors Kalnbērzs published in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* in 1989 and reprinted in the Estonian newspaper in 1990. After reading the interview and contacting the article's author, Kristel was able to reach other transsexual people in

[2] See the journal's website, https://www.fieraj.org/forumo (accessed June 14, 2024).

Estonia. The US *FtM*[3] Newsletter (FTM International, 1990) even mentions 'a special visitor from Leningrad' at the 1990 monthly FtM get-together who 'had come to the Bay Area to interview surgeons and meet other FTMs'.

To sum up, some possibilities for communication and information exchange between trans* existed during Soviet times. While these possibilities were quite limited at first, they greatly expanded with the decline of the Soviet Union and increased exponentially with the development of the Internet. Studying the development of the Anglophone trans* community, Avery Dame-Griff (2023, p. 2) argues: 'For those who came into their trans identity in the 1970s and 1980s […] the rise of the desktop computer and the Internet revolutionised not only how they communicated but also the very makeup of what was then known as the "gender community"'. The next section will discuss early online networks that trans* people in some ex-Soviet countries were and are connected to, as well as the features of early digital cultures.

3 Trans* communication and the dawn of the Internet

In 1998, the Ukrainian government approved the 'National informatisation program'. This program defined Ukraine's 'integration into the global information space in accordance with the contemporary information geopolitics tendencies' (Zakon Ukraïny N74/98. Pro natsional'nu prohramu informatyzatsiï, 1998) as a state priority. Integration into the global information space proceeded very slowly: in 2002, only one in every 50 people in an urban area had Internet access. Tetiana Popova, head of the newly formed Internet Association of Ukraine, complained in 2003 (see Popova, 2003) that Ukrainian people were completely disinterested in connecting to the global web: they would rather buy a TV or a mobile phone[4] than a computer of the same price with Internet access. Yet there was a category of people in Ukraine who were very interested in connecting to the Internet who had been 'going' online since the Internet's appearance in the ex-Soviet states, and actively contributed to the Internet's development. For trans* people, Internet access was literally life-saving.

In this section, I will address the multiple histories of the Internet. These histories are related to the communication and communities trans* people from ex-Soviet countries shaped when connecting to the Internet. The earlier versions of online platforms that existed before the privatised World Wide Web's rise in the 1990s differed from the latter technologically and socially. An important network in this regard was Usenet – a distributed newsgroup service (now archived by Google Groups and Internet Archive) that proliferated in the 1990s.

Usenet relied on users' direct input and innovations for its development. The 'do-it-together' community was fostered by the decentralised character of the network. Dame-Griff (2023, p. 85) states: '[…] as a decentralized network, newsgroups did not have

[3] Here and later, FtM stands for 'female-to-male', and MtF for 'male-to-female' – terminology often used by transsexual people.

[4] At that time, mobile phones did not have features enabling access to the Internet.

membership or sign-up requirements. Instead, one's Usenet "identity" was tied to one's email address, which could easily be anonymised or spoofed. Usenet's reliance on email addresses also made it platform agnostic: any single platform [...] could (and did) allow users to send and receive Usenet messages. Usenet was one of the first unregulated cross-platform discussion platforms available to a variety of audiences'. As a network, Usenet also did not have one centralised server that the users would dial into. This made it much cheaper for users, who did not have to pay long-distance telephone bills and democratised access to the network for trans* users. The use of an email address for logging in provided additional safety for those who were worried about being 'outed'.

Technological decentralisation went hand-in-hand with the 'decentralised' community-building. A Usenet group did not have a single moderator who would control, set rules or censor anyone; new groups could not be deleted; and the process of content moderation and 'netiquette' was developed collectively. The lack of moderation could be and was abused: Usenet is believed to be the first online space where spam messages were 'invented'. Yet the Usenet community relied on self-organisation: it did not call for government regulation and looked for internal technological solutions to resist spamming and scamming (Campbell, 1994).

The Alt.transgendered newsgroup that appeared in 1992 quickly became the main Usenet space for trans* people from all over the world, including people from ex-Soviet countries (the first messages from users from Ukraine appeared on Usenet from 1996 onwards, only several years after the creation of the alt.transgendered group). The newsgroup was a space for debates and discussions of identities and experiences, as well as the creation of new terms and practices. Knowledge and solidarity practices developed in offline activist circles extended to online activity. For instance, Leslie Feinberg, an American activist and writer, was cited a lot in the newsgroup (especially after Feinberg's book *Transgender Warriors* came out in 1996). While discussing Feinberg's new book in 1996, users also informed each other of Feinberg's health and made fundraising donations to help offset Feinberg's medical bills.[5]

FidoNet, a network similar to Usenet, was more popular in ex-USSR countries. Kyiv and Kharkiv FidoNet nodes appeared in 1990 and were among the first Fidonet nodes in the USSR (Dan'shina, 2021). FidoNet featured possibilities for one-to-one communication, as well as forum-style communication called 'echo conferences'. While echo conferences in English like *Gender* existed on FidoNet, the *RuSexualDifference* conference in Russian that appeared in 1998 was more popular among Russian-speaking users and included discussions on gender and transsexuality. One of the most important features of FidoNet was that it became the first platform for digital file sharing. Continuing the tradition of Soviet *samizdat* (self-published materials), FidoNet saw the rise of 'shadow librarians' – community librarians who typed in thousands of books and shared them online (Bodó, 2018, pp. 34–35). The maker communities[6] that formed around book digitisation promoted the culture of free information access and knowledge exchange.

[5] Post by Michelle, 22 March 1996, alt.transgendered, archived by the Internet Archive.

[6] See the study of the maker communities and the historical roots of the D.I.Y. maker cultures in Kohtala et al. (2020).

Like Usenet and Fidonet, Geocities was key for trans* people in building communities and knowledge exchange. GeoCities appeared in late 1994 as a web hosting service. In 1995, it allowed users to create their own websites for free and to read the websites created by others. While Usenet and Fidonet were breakthroughs in online communication, GeoCities was a breakthrough in democratising web design and hosting. In the words of Ian Milligan (2019, p. 172), 'For the first time, users could create their own webpages without needing programming skills or knowledge of FTP, Telnet, HTML, Usenet, and so forth. It was in places like GeoCities where users became part of virtual communities held together by volunteers, neighbourhood watches, webrings, and guest books. These methods, grounded in rhetoric of both place and community, made the web accessible to millions of people.'

GeoCities became one of the most popular services, reaching its first million users in 1997 and growing even more afterward. GeoCities websites were clustered into different 'neighbourhoods' – communities shaped by different interests or themes. As a platform, GeoCities was also open to nonnormative users, to the extent that a special neighbourhood, *WestHollywood*, was started.

Trans* websites were a prominent part of the WestHollywood neighbourhood. Dame-Griff (2023, p. 126) argues that trans* websites can be considered the early ancestors of social media profiles. These websites existed within the broader 'offline' ecosystem of community organising that involved publishing collectives and community archives created by trans* people for trans* people (see Dame-Griff, 2023). The Internet made it easy to share community archives, and thus, the generation of trans* 'community librarians' appeared, curating collections of useful links, advice on gender transition and personal stories on their web pages.

Such curation and archiving involved technological innovation. GeoCities existed at a time when search engines were just developing. Contrary to our current experience, information was not 'sieved' by a search engine and was not limited to specific search keywords. It was difficult for new users to find information on specific topics of interest. To address this problem, GeoCities users invented decentralised 'webrings' that connected a multitude of websites through hyperlinking relationships. By adding a website to the thematic ring (like Global TransgendeRing), one would make it easier to find. Webrings were created and looked after by active users, who often formed small collectives. In addition to this, users also created directories categorised by themes or countries. One of the examples is Susana Marques's TV/CD/TS/TG World Directory (a world directory of transvestite, cross-dresser, transsexual and transgender websites). Sarah McTavish (2020, p. 212) identifies Susana Marques's directory as significant and influential within the global trans* community: it was 'extraordinarily highly connected' and had the highest PageRank on WestHollywood. These 'hacks', as well as invisible long-term labour of digital 'community librarians' like Susana Marques, ensured that trans* users could find information and build new connections, especially locally.

GeoCities soon became known among trans* people globally. One of Maria Debinska's interlocutors from Poland (see Dębińska, 2020, p. 213) recalled that discovering GeoCities trans* websites in 1995 allowed her to self-diagnose, self-define and find the proof that she was not alone. My browsing of the WestHollywood neighbourhood showed that it was the first hosting service for LGBT organisations' webpages, such as the Ukrainian Nash Mir

and Gay Ukraine International. Likewise, I found a multitude of websites of grassroots initiatives, such as Action Romania association in Romania; Roz Mov, the first Greek LGBT website; the first gay website of Uzbekistan; Croatian LesBiGays on the Internet (and a separate Croatian Transsexual Page); a Gay Latvia page; and personal webpages from Ukraine, Poland, Estonia and other countries. The ease of use, helpful instructions and direct support provided by international community members made GeoCities and WestHollywood, in particular, popular with sexually and gender nonnormative users from Eastern Europe. The free hosting service offered by GeoCities was particularly important for trans* people from ex-Soviet countries who often did not have money to pay for the Internet, let alone for web hosting.[7]

This section has covered early digital trans* communication, focusing on newsgroups and websites. I have shown that the architecture of the early Internet platforms supported decentralised, community-oriented and 'do-it-together' maker cultures. These cultures, in turn, often had their roots in earlier offline activist and underground practices, such as trans* activism or Soviet *samizdat* underground cultures. I also noted that trans* users, including users from ex-USSR countries, took an active part in the shaping of early Internet platforms. In the next section, I will turn to online trans* communication in the 1990s to early 2000s, with a focus on Ukraine. I will discuss further the 'do-it-together' ethos of digital trans* communities and why it was important for trans* people from ex-Soviet countries.

4 Connecting to the network: Ukraine and digital trans* cultures

After the collapse of the Soviet state, transsexuality became more known – but also more regulated. The newly formed nation-states adopted conservative legislation with regard to gender transition. In Ukraine, legal recognition of gender was linked to medical sex reassignment. Husakouskaya (2018, pp. 28–29) points out: 'From 1996 till 2016, there were two primary governmental mechanisms: the Decree and the Commission. Through discursive practices, these regulatory mechanisms shaped transgender subjects as problematic and offered specific solutions to this/their "problem". The Decree stipulated how the procedures should be carried out. It specified steps for transgender persons to undergo "transition" (medically and legally), determined the "medico-biological" and "socio-psychological" indications and counter indications for this process, and established a commission of doctors (often referred to as "the Commission") with the authority to mandate and control access to medical and legal procedures related to gender markers and change of name'.

Within this regulatory system, someone's documents could be legally changed only after the sex reassignment procedure that involved mandatory psychiatric hospitalisation and sterilisation. Sex reassignment surgery was prohibited for people under 25 years and those with a child. The Commission met infrequently and considered only a handful of

[7] The poverty among transsexual people in Ukraine was mentioned in the interview that a Ukrainian transsexual woman, Alisa, gave to Vasilii Kalita in 1998 in the *Meditsinskaia Gazeta* newspaper (published on the gay.ru website, archived by the Internet Archive).

cases each time. There was no possibility to appeal the verdict. The whole process was financially costly, difficult bureaucratically (Husakouskaya, 2018, pp. 28–29). There were risks of unemployment, harassment and violence connected to the fact that sex reassignment surgery, a prerequisite for document change, could take place only after a full year of a person's full psychological and social 'adaptation' to the desired gender. In addition to the bureaucratic and medical 'gatekeeping' (external control of the access to desired changes and services), trans* people had to combat transphobia and the lack of knowledge and experience in trans* medicine from medical professionals. These barriers made the lives of trans* people barely liveable.

Trans* people who desired body modifications or document change often had to rely on D.I.Y. (from 'do-it-yourself') strategies to speed up and ensure a favourable decision from the Commission. These strategies included community-driven practices of knowledge production and autonomous healthcare practices. Autonomous health care practices (such as D.I.Y. HRT – 'do-it-yourself' hormonal replacement therapy) supported by community scholarship and expertise are not unique to ex-Soviet countries; they are an international phenomenon. Some of the positive aspects of autonomous trans* health care practices are an assertion of trans* agency, the greater accessibility and affordability of hormones, a high level of information support from the community, and liberation from normative biomedical assumptions (see August-Rae et al., 2024). As the description of one of the popular Anglophone mailing lists, *MtF HRT*, states in English, 'We are not afraid to research endocrinology ourselves and take our treatment in our own hands'.[8] And while in the Anglophone context, both print and online guidelines on D.I.Y. HRT were developed by trans* activist communities, these guidelines were not useful for people from ex-Soviet countries due to the unavailability of specific medications. Therefore, the need for local knowledge production was pressing, and the Internet became the tool for fulfilling this need. In 1996, user Lena from Kyiv wrote to the alt.transgendered newsgroup, asking whether there was anyone from the ex-USSR there. She mentioned that there were no mailing lists for trans* people in the ex-USSR region.[9] In 1998, Lena created *TGRus* – the first mailing list in Russian for transsexual and transvestite people, their loved ones, 'and such'. The year before that, she created a personal website, which was one of the first trans* websites with information in both Russian and English.

Lena volunteered with the Ganimed LGBT Association based in Kyiv, one of the first Ukrainian LGBT organisations. Since 1995, she has co-organised the meetings of the informal transsexuals and transvestites club in Ganimed. However, her web activism was on a much greater scale. With a professional background in IT, Lena was very experienced in using both Usenet, Fidonet and the Internet in general. On her website, Lena described her transsexual journey in English and Russian. The website also presented information in English on the political, medical and social concerns of transsexual people in Ukraine. Lena gathered links to legislation and standards of care from other countries and asked the (Anglophone) website visitors to send her more documents. These documents were

[8] See the MtF HRT mailing list, available at groups.io (accessed June 14, 2024).
[9] Post by Lena, alt.transgendered, 26 October 1996, archived by the Internet Archive.

used to demand better legislation and standards of conduct from the Ukrainian Ministry of Health. Lena also archived on her website articles featuring her comments to journalists. Using her vast knowledge of international practices and legislation, she critiqued both Ukrainian legislation and the gatekeeping practices of doctors in the media.

Finally, Lena included links to useful trans* resources both in English and in Russian. Users were encouraged to engage with Lena by contacting her via email or guestbook; Russian-speaking trans* people were encouraged to contact her to sign up for the TGRus mailing list, and doctors could sign up for a separate mailing list for medical professionals. Thus, Lena's website was both a personal 'social profile', an archive, and a social document aimed at building international solidarity to change the situation in Ukraine and educating and connecting local trans* people.

Lena is an example of a scholar and community expert who fostered knowledge production on hormonal, social and surgical transition, as well as created technological possibilities for safe communication and community-building. The Internet's development, which took place alongside offline grassroots initiatives, helped somewhat to 'level' the epistemological inequality that existed between the Global North and the ex-Soviet space. On the one hand, multiple online 'shadow libraries' were created in the 1990s, continuing the *samizdat* tradition of D.I.Y. book digitisation and translation mentioned in the previous section. On the other hand, major scientific journals gained an online presence, which brought them 'closer' to countries like Ukraine. In the 1990s, Lena was able to access articles from open-access endocrinology scientific journals and was thus aware of the latest discussions and findings. The Internet also enabled direct contact with other scholars. Since 1996, Lena has been active on the Anglophone *Crone* mailing list on hormone replacement therapy for MtF and created and co-moderated the Anglophone MtF HRT mailing list.[10] She also took part in the 'trans-academic' UK mailing list on Jisc, thus being involved in and influencing international knowledge production on trans* medicine. This knowledge was then shared with trans* people and doctors via closed TGRus mailing lists.

On Lena's website, one can find different 'archaeological' layers of trans* and media histories. As discussed earlier, one of the main functions of the website was also to promote the new TGRus mailing list. However, making a website popular at a time when search engines were just developing required effort and determination. At the same time, some trans* creators led their digital lives only within one online 'ecosystem' (such as GeoCities), yet Lena's embrace of the cross-platform approach and both global and local digital partnerships guaranteed that her website could be easily found by users from any platform. Lena linked the website to the GeoCities Global TransgendeRing and to the Angelfire platform through the virtual 'award' banner. Following 2000, it was also listed under 'Ukraine' in Susana Marques's TV/CD/TS/TG World Directory.

Lena's website was also 'linked' to the emerging regional trans* Internet ecosystem. A curated section listed links to the webpages created by other trans* people from ex-Soviet countries – and they listed Lena's website on their pages in return. Such mutual collective

[10] Here and later, the information is sourced from Lena's website, her postings in different mailing lists, or my email correspondence with Lena (June 2024).

action boosted the popularity of all websites involved and brought more people into TGRus. Communicating via the TGRus mailing list, trans* people could inform each other about trusted doctors, hormone use, and legislative changes in their countries, as well as form long-lasting online and offline connections.

While TGRus became a popular trans* mailing list, Lena's website was visited almost 70,000 times from 1997 to 2000, and Lena created and ran both without Internet access. While Lena was lucky to have a personal computer, due to high Internet costs in Ukraine, she had access only to the email address service but not the online Internet. All local and international communication was carried out with the help of coding skills and filters that helped to source information from different networks. She used the 'accmail' service to access webpages via email, and developed a free 'mail2ftp' service that enabled her and other users to create their own websites with just email access. This brings us back to the 'do-it-together' culture that started the Internet: a community of (trans*) computer scientists, software engineers and civic hackers (those who deploy information technology tools 'to enrich civic life or to solve particular problems of a civic nature', Hogge, 2010, p. 10).

Lena used her programming skills not just to create online spaces of communication for trans* people but to help them stay safe in those spaces. While TGRus was not designed as a secret group, Lena moderated access to it to protect participants' safety. In the 1990s and early 2000s, many trans* people did not own a personal computer with Internet access and used to work on computers or in public spaces such as Internet cafes. Information leaks would have created safety risks not just for the individual user but for the whole community of TGRus. Therefore, Lena designed a software package that encrypted emails and data stored on the computer and shared it freely on her website, specifying that it could also be used by 'any representatives of sexual minorities'. She also gave consultations to those trans* users who were not tech-savvy about the use of encryption. Lena's encryption software was probably helpful for many people beyond trans* users at the dawn of the Internet. And it has been invaluable for sustaining trans* communication and communities in the ex-Soviet space.

While the previous section pointed to trans* Internet users as knowledge producers, community librarians, archivists, and makers, this section explored the embeddings of Internet and trans* autonomous D.I.Y. health care practices. 'Zooming in' on Lena's website and her role as a scholar and community expert in early digital trans* communities foregrounds the contributions trans* people like Lena made to the fields of endocrinology, medicine, computer science and Internet development. While the focus of the section was on mutual aid in health care, one can understand the cross-platform 'outreach' that Lena embedded into her website design, as well as the encryption software and information literacy she provided to the community, as practices of care. Such practices of digital care not only enabled trans* people to find their community in the vast sea of the early Internet and to make their lives more liveable but also changed the fabric of the Internet and ensured that the community itself would be well equipped to protect itself in the future. In conclusion, I will address the significance of these practices in the current moment.

5 From dawn to dusk and back again

In the article, I explored trans* communication and communities in ex-Soviet space, with a focus on the early Internet, do-it-yourself and do-it-together practices and mutual aid. I have shown how trans* users from Ukraine were not just passive recipients of 'Western' knowledge, using the Internet solely for communication purposes. They actively influenced global knowledge production, provided technological solutions, and sustained a collective do-it-together ethos crucial for trans* communities.

Decades later, the commercial web has completely replaced the early forms of the Internet discussed in the article. Just like its media predecessors, the Internet is now at the heart of communication and communities around the world – including trans* communities. A plethora of social networking websites and apps have appeared and made forums and mailing lists seem outdated. Contemporary AI-powered search engines allow us to search the web effortlessly in seconds. This creates the illusion of the infinite possibilities of the Internet as the invisible wireless communication system that flows across borders and 'lives in the cloud'. However, this idea is far from reality. In the 21st century, submarine and terrestrial Internet cables (see Starosielski, 2015), satellites and cell phone towers, the data they carry, access to this data, and Internet architecture depend on transnational companies, national regulation, and geopolitical factors that directly affect trans* lives and communities.

Russian internal and external politics, including its invasion of Ukraine, is a significant threat to trans* communities. Trans* people in Ukraine are under direct attack. The threat of physical destruction is combined with economic vulnerability (Iryskina, 2023). While Ukrainian legislation regarding gender recognition has somewhat improved, hormone replacement therapy is still the necessary condition for document change. Yet the war has worsened the shortage of endocrinologists and limited access to medical services for those in need of body modifications (Iryskina, 2023). Abroad, Ukrainian trans* refugees may struggle to get medical help and gender recognition. This means that trans* people in and from Ukraine, like years ago, often rely on D.I.Y. hormone replacement therapy and mutual aid networks made possible by the Internet.

At the same time, access to these networks can be limited or risky for trans* people. Electricity cuts caused by Russian attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure affect the amount of time one can spend online. Following China and Iran, Russia is pursuing the project of creating a sovereign Internet, which means rerouting cyberspace on the occupied territories and integrating them into the Russian network (see Limonier et al., 2021). Surveillance, website blocking and limiting or distorting search results (Makhortykh et al., 2022) in Russia and on the territories it has occupied, combined with openly transphobic legislation, endangers trans* users and suppresses ways of building transnational solidarity.

The Russian information war and cyberattacks spur investment into cybersecurity and national legislation on cybersecurity, both in Ukraine and globally. The securitisation of the Internet that is taking place globally is happening alongside the digitisation of identity. Identity, tax, migration, medical and other documents are migrated to online systems that are sometimes merged, which makes trans* people even more vulnerable. Likewise,

profit-driven corporations that control and manipulate social media algorithms limit users' exposure to specific 'bubbles' and apply policies of validating one's identity online have been shown to discriminate against trans* people (Dame-Griff, 2023, pp. 180–181). Finally, the conservative turn and global anti-gender mobilisation (see Hemmings, 2020) are targeting trans* people specifically, and the Internet is weaponised as a tool for misinformation campaigns. The tendencies we can observe urge us to think not just about preserving and re-inventing our community librarianship, information and media literacy, cross-platform outreach, digital security and other practices mentioned or unmentioned in this article. While Lena's website, TGRus, and other trans* mutual aid networks continue to exist, shape-shifting since the dawn of the Internet and to its dusk, it is the network of imperialisms, capitalism and the normative gender system that many of us need help uprooting.

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