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Yandex

The advent and increasing popularity of the Internet in recent decades not only opens up the world to new information and creates a greater sense of global connectivity, but also provides a new means of creating, accessing, and understanding culture, and in some senses a new culture of its own. What people do on the Internet, how it is used, and which sites people choose to visit provide a window into the mindsets and interests of people around the globe. Many sites provide information, such as news and media, while others provide services. Search engines are sites that tie the Internet together, creating a “home base” for the user to easily find and access the information and services they need on the Internet. In the U.S. and most other countries with a large population of Internet users, the American site Google is overwhelmingly the most frequently used search engine. However in Russia the Russian site Yandex is the most popular. This fact raises several questions: (1) why do Russians prefer to use Yandex, when it seems to have become the norm in the rest of the world to use Google?; (2) how is Yandex built to attract Russian users and compete against such a huge international corporation?; and (3) what can we learn about Russia from this interesting aspect of Russian Internet use? Before addressing these questions, it is important to consider two far more basic issues.

Why is the Internet important in Russia?

The Internet is a growing phenomenon that is becoming increasingly important everywhere. The Internet is used as a means to quickly access information from anywhere in the world. People can send emails, check traffic, look at maps, read the news, engage in social networking, and research anything from the comfort of their own homes simply by using a computer. In Russia, Internet usage has been increasing exponentially in recent years. According to the Spring 2013 report from Yandex on the development of the Internet in Russia's regions, in 2012, 61.2 million, or 52% of people over the age of 18, used the Internet every month ("Development of the Internet" 2). This percentage seems low compared to other developed countries. In fact, Russia is ranked 81st in Internet penetration behind other developed countries such as the U.S., which has a percent Internet penetration of about 81%; Great Britain with a percent penetration of 87%; and the Netherlands with an astounding percent penetration of 93% ("List of Countries"). This figure is impressive, however, because as little as eight years ago, in 2004, the monthly Internet audience in Russia was only about 10%. Over the past decade Internet use has exploded in Russia, with more people than before in urban centers such as Moscow and St. Petersburg regularly using the Internet. Significantly, an increasing number of people in smaller cities and more remote areas of Russia have gained access to the Internet. Furthermore, according to the same report, not only is the Internet audience increasing, but also the frequency of use. In 2004, the number of monthly Internet users was approximately split three-fold between users who only accessed the Internet one time that month, users who accessed the Internet about

every week, and users who accessed the Internet daily. By 2012, about 70% of monthly Internet users were daily users (“Development of the Internet”). Judging by these statistics, it is clear that the Internet is becoming increasingly influential and important in Russia.

Yandex in Russia

Yandex is the largest Internet company in Russia and the most popular search engine, accounting for 61.9% of all searches in the country. It is also the most visited website in the country and is often the default homepage on Russian language software (“About Yandex”). Yandex is headquartered in Moscow and also has an office in St. Petersburg. The company’s core markets aside from Russia include Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Turkey, where they account for a significant portion of search traffic. Yandex, much like Google, is not simply a search engine. The company provides a vast array of Internet services focusing on solving all sorts of user problems. The site includes common services such as email, maps, weather video, etc., but also has some unique services, such as Yandex.Money, which allows users to securely transfer money and complete transactions online, similar to PayPal, and Yandex.Taxi, which allows users to request a taxi from their mobile phone using an app, and then pay for the taxi using Yandex.Money. Yandex’s goal of offering its users useful, pragmatic services and solving daily problems is obvious in these more specific services. Yandex even offers a service to help students study for the EGE, which is the standardized test Russian students must take to enter university (*Yandex.ru*). By offering these new, interesting, and cutting edge services,

Yandex strives to stand out as a company and carve out a niche for itself in the Internet market. The company does not want to be viewed as a Russian alternative to companies that dominate the market in the rest of the world, such as Google, but instead seeks to bring its own unique ideas to the table to solve problems for its users. Clearly Yandex is successful in this goal, as it has captured such a large Internet audience in the Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Kazak, and Turkish markets.

Yandex as News Service

Although Yandex is primarily a search engine, another major aspect of the site is news. Yandex.News is a news aggregator, providing links to articles from many sources on different current events. Although Yandex does not publish articles itself, many Russians use Yandex as a primary source of online news, either because they already use the site for other purposes or because the site makes it easy to quickly navigate many articles. Obviously, the media source a person uses plays a large role in informing political opinions and can strongly shape their worldview. Russian President Vladimir Putin understands the importance of the media and recently mentioned classifying Yandex as a media outlet. In Russia, media outlets require a license, however Yandex is yet not classified as a media outlet, since Yandex.News only aggregates articles. Putin suggested that Yandex should be reclassified in order to provide more control over the company, which Putin believes is exposed to too much foreign influence in a time of raised tensions with the West ("Shares of Yandex Fall"). However, Yandex does not consider itself a mass

media company and considers Yandex.News as simply another service provided on the site. It is unclear what the ultimate result of such a reclassification will be, but there is no doubt that any changes will have a huge effect on the millions of users who rely on Yandex.News as a news source. That announcement fueled a drop in the price of Yandex stock and pressure from Putin is making it harder to conduct Internet business in Russia ("Shares of Yandex Fall"). However, the company still holds a large portion of the Internet market in Russia regardless of government action and continues to try to skirt government influence.

Attraction of Yandex

With this background information it is easy to understand the scope and cultural implications of Yandex. To find out why Russians use Yandex, I conducted a survey in which I posed four questions. First, which search engine do you usually use? Second, why do you prefer this site? Third, which features or services of the site do you find most useful? Finally, do you ever use another site, and if so, for what purposes? Of about 20 sets of responses, approximately half of the Russian users preferred Yandex, while half preferred Google, which is about what is expected given the above statistics. In this survey users who prefer Google argue that Google provides better search results and that it is easier to find the information one needs. Another user said that Google is the preferred choice because of the Google Chrome browser and the default search engine for the browser is Google. Many Yandex users claim that they prefer Yandex simply because it is more convenient and more comfortable. Many users say that although they have a preference, they use both

sites at times. The general consensus of the survey seems to be whether the user prefers Google or Yandex. For topics and searches specifically confined to Russia or countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States, Yandex provides better results. There is a consensus among users that services such as maps, weather, and bus schedules are more accurate and useful on Yandex than on Google. This trend makes sense given Yandex's stated goals and business strategy.

The survey I conducted provided good information from the perspective of the Russian Internet user, but it is also important to look at the site from the perspective of the company that created it. While in St. Petersburg, I met with College of William & Mary alumna Suzanne Reed, who works in the Yandex.Money branch of Yandex in St. Petersburg. We discussed the role Yandex plays in the Internet market in Russia, and also the goals and aspirations of the company. In order to better answer my questions, she put me in touch with a member of the Yandex PR department. When asked why Yandex is so successful in Russia, he replied:

[Yandex is popular for] a bunch of reasons. First and foremost, we think we can serve Russians more accurate[ly], we try to provide services they need everyday, which [are] probably totally irrelevant for other countries, and we better understand what they mean and what they expect to get in any regions of the country, as most of the Yandex team are based in Russia, in different cities" (Yandex PR Dept., July 28, 2014).

This statement concurs with the general consensus of Yandex users that Yandex is built specifically for Russians and so can better serve them. The popularity of

Yandex in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Turkey is a result of the process of localization. Whereas the Russian language Google site is an adaptation of the English Google site in Russian, Yandex is actually built by Russians in Russia, who understand exactly what a user needs or means when they conduct a search. With regard to popularity in countries outside of Russia and localization, the PR rep said:

We are trying to be trans-local rather than global. Trans-local means we do not translate or adopt our Russian services for other countries/languages, but rather rebuild or even construct from scratch some unique services, counting local specific, internet usage patterns, the age of users, urbanity, religion, time zone, climate, daily life and tons of other local factors (Yandex PR Dept., July 28, 2014).

This process not only applies to other countries, but even to different regions within Russia, where users have specific needs and may even use different words or phrases to describe the same thing. Yandex's niche seems to be its unique goal as a company to provide a tailored service that its users will find more personalized and easier to use than any other service. This policy, of course, would explain why users in my survey simply find Yandex "more convenient and comfortable." According to the PR rep, it is this personalization and attention to Yandex's unique user base that has allowed the company to resist the global influence of Google.

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