

## YouTube as a teaching tool for Russian Politics

Peter Rutland <sup>1</sup>

[Written for *Newsnet*, the bulletin of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies.]

For many academics, the suggestion that YouTube could be a useful teaching tool is anathema. Don't students already waste too much of their young lives playing video games and watching movies, without devoting precious classroom time to watching and listening? Some professors go to great lengths to prohibit students from using Wikipedia, YouTube and similar distractions of the modern age. Precisely the kind of attributes that YouTube viewing cultivates – frivolity, falsification and fun – are considered to be the antithesis of learning.

Like it or not, the current cohort of students are indeed the Facebook/YouTube generation. They are used to absorbing information through moving visual images, typically with a pumping sound track. So any effort by the professor to introduce YouTube into the classroom will be likely be greeted with enthusiasm, and is almost guaranteed to result in more satisfied and engaged students.

However, YouTube should not be embraced just as a quick fix to curry favor and boost teaching evaluations. Its value lies in opening students' minds to other cultures and raising ideas that would otherwise be much more difficult to convey. Video communicates a sense of reality and insights into alternative points of view much more immediately than can be obtained from reading participant accounts or novels. Traditionalists will deny that reliable information or complex ideas can be communicated using this medium. But there is some evidence from psychology to confirm that images can "stick" in the mind in ways that pure information content does not, in part due to their emotional content. I should hasten to add that in my classes viewing YouTube clips does *not* come at the expense of assigned reading or lecture time. Typically, I will show one or two clips per meeting, usually taking up around five minutes of class time.

For those who are not familiar with YouTube – it is a free online video-sharing service that was launched in April 2005, enabling users to upload video excerpts, usually of 10 minutes or less, in a simple, speedy manner. The clips may be produced by the user, copied from a television broadcast or DVD recording, or even spirited out of some archive. The site quickly became extremely popular, with thousands of videos uploaded and millions of users per day. In November 2006 the site was bought by Google. In the month of May 2008, 83 million people in the United States watched 4.1 billion clips on YouTube. ([www.comscore.com](http://www.comscore.com)) 90 percent of the YouTube materials are pure entertainment, mostly music videos, home movies and sophomoric humor (along the lines of "my cat looks like Hitler"). But the site does include some serious cultural, historical and political content. Newspapers, TV stations and bloggers also post material and provide links to YouTube, an example of the rise of cross-media communications.

An early example of YouTube's political impact was the August 2006 controversy around Virginia Senator George Allen, who was caught at a campaign rally calling the Indian-American who was filming him for his Democratic opponent a "macaca." The clip was posted on YouTube, after which it was picked up by national television and other media. Allen, who was considered a

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Bonnie Loshbaugh, Oleg Reut and Kevin Wiliarty for advice. There are of course many sites on the web offering free video, including the sites of all the main Russian TV stations. But for the sake of brevity and convenience this article will focus on YouTube.

potential presidential candidate, could not explain his use of what appeared to be a racist slur, and went on to lose the election. YouTube can also be used to promote rather than undermine a candidate – witness the “I got a crush on Obama” video of summer 2007.

The YouTube site can easily be searched by keywords or tags, and each clip comes with a suggested list of similar items for further viewing. YouTube is easy to use and reliable, an important consideration for classroom use. It can be activated with a couple of clicks – there is no need to spend precious minutes searching for news clips on TV station websites, then trying to figure out how to make them play. The YouTube site requires Macromedia Flash Player, which is installed on almost every computer. The videos can be expanded to full screen (unlike most of the TV stations that stream online). The quality of image is uneven, but it is usually adequate for use in a social science class (as opposed to art history or film studies, which may have higher aesthetic demands). In summer of 2008 YouTube introduced a facility allowing viewers to add commentary in the form of subtitles (by clicking on an icon in the bottom right corner of the screen). This means for example that some Russian political speeches now have English translation, and can be used in classes where students don't know Russian.

Users can register and create their own personal playlists: a listing of favorite videos that can be played without searching for individual titles. These playlists can also be linked to one's website (through the help of university computing staff). I maintain a list of about 100 Russian politics videos which are accessible through my website:

[http://prutland.web.wesleyan.edu/russia\\_videos.htm](http://prutland.web.wesleyan.edu/russia_videos.htm) Most of the videos mentioned in this article are available there, but to find a specific video it is easier just to do a keyword search for it directly on YouTube. Sometimes videos will disappear from YouTube, so particularly valuable clips should be downloaded. (YouTube itself does not have a download facility, but there are other programs available such as UnPlug.) Also, apart from showing clips in class, you can email the links to students or post them on a Blackboard site, so that those interested can watch on their own time.

Generally speaking, professors can use YouTube without worrying about copyright – a growing concern with other digital media. YouTube does not pre-screen videos added to the site, but it does remove clips when informed that they may be in violation of copyright law. Their approach has been deemed “fair use” in court cases to date, though there is an ongoing suit against Google by Viacom.

YouTube is obviously of great value for language teachers, and for courses in art and culture. Its utility for social scientists is less obvious. I had always used a lot of video material in my political science classes to convey some of the flavor of Russian historical identity and contemporary society – extracts from movies from *Alexander Nevsky* to *Brat*, and passages from documentaries recorded off TV. But I was always looking for more recent political material, and I was tired of juggling with videos and DVDs. (It is impossible to cue up DVDs, so if you want to use clips you have to have them digitized.) Also, movies and documentaries tend to be slow-moving, so you may have to devote 20-30 minutes to a single video presentation: a major investment of class time.

I was an overnight convert to the utility of YouTube. Someone sent me a link to the new site, and I decided to see what they had of relevance to Russian politics. I typed in “Gorbachev,” and one of the first things that came up was a TV commercial that Mikhail Gorbachev made for Pizza Hut back in 1992, shortly after he left office. It shows Gorbachev taking his granddaughter for a pizza in downtown Moscow while the other patrons argue about Gorbachev's legacy. (“He brought us chaos!” “Yes, but he brought us pizza!”). The Russian public objected to their former president selling out so ignominiously (his appearance reportedly earned \$1 million for the Gorbachev

Foundation), so the ad was pulled after one week. It was never shown in the US, and had been lost to history – until YouTube.

A classic YouTube clip, and one that I typically use when I am giving a public lecture, is the music video celebrating the leadership of Vladimir Putin, set to the 2002 disco hit “A Man Like Putin.” It featured three girls who called themselves the group “Singing Together” (*Poyushchie vmeste*), a play on the name of the pro-Putin youth movement “Walking together” (*Idushchie vmeste*) The lyrics relate how a girl dumped her boyfriend “And now I want someone like Putin, full of strength, who doesn’t drink, who won’t hurt me, who won’t run away.” The origins of the song are unclear: it was played on Russian radio stations, but never put on sale. Presumably, it was a masterpiece of Kremlin guerrilla marketing. In 2006 the song surfaced on YouTube, now with a stream of interesting photos of Putin – Putin as a child, meeting world leaders, playing with his dog, skiing, flying in a fighter aircraft, etc. The song conveys Putin’s charisma to an American audience, the personal appeal behind his 80 percent public approval ratings. At the same time it opens the door to a discussion about image management and the scope for cultivating a “cult of personality” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are some anti-Putin versions of the song on YouTube, and other music clips that satirize Putin’s rule, such as the ballad “I’m staying (*Ya ostanus’*), or the rap song “Putin’s plan” (*Plan Putina*) – a play on words, since “plan” is slang for marijuana in Russian. President Dmitry Medvedev has not yet inspired a similar opus, though there is a rather tacky version of “I got a crush on Obama” with Medvedev’s face pasted in for Obama.

The YouTube material that I use for my Russian politics class falls into several categories. First, there are clips that represent direct historical material, either from news reports or from documentary segments that have been uploaded. Examples range from political speeches, to interviews with experts, to newsreel footage of dramatic events. From the Stalin era, there is Lavrentii Beria’s funeral oration, the 1945 Red Square victory parade, or Paul Robeson signing the Soviet national anthem. There are speeches by all the Soviet and Russian leaders. Interesting examples include Yeltsin’s resignation speech, Putin’s hard-line address to the April 2007 Munich security summit, and Medvedev’s first public speech in English, delivered to the Davos forum in February 2008. One can find numerous news clips of the Chechen wars, and some of the street fighting around the Russian parliament in October 1993. The Kremlin’s English-language propaganda channel Russia Today posts selected stories on YouTube, and some of them are useful, such as “Who is Dmitry Medvedev?,” or their piece on the new president’s affection for Deep Purple. There are plentiful materials to illustrate US-Soviet relations, such as Ronald Reagan’s “Tear down this wall” speech, or the 1984 “Bear in the woods” campaign ad – which resonates with the current US debate over the August 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia.

Political campaign ads are useful for classroom use because by their nature they are short and designed for maximum impact. Unfortunately only a handful of the very interesting Russian 1996 presidential campaign ads are available on YouTube. But the banned Motherland Party (“Rodina”) anti-immigrant election ad from 2005 is available, along with propaganda videos from nationalist youth groups such as Nashi and Molodaya gvardiya. Some Russian product commercials found on YouTube can also be used to stimulate debates about xenophobia and sexism in Russian society – such as the anti-American Kvas Cola ads, “Nestle for men”, or AlfaBank’s “Alfacheck.” (For comparison, look at “Russian ads from the 80s.”)

Some of the historical material is repackaged with a humorous twist. There is an amusing compilation that splices together the New Year’s broadcasts of Putin, Yeltsin, Gorbachev and Brezhnev. Then there are the clips that are funny but not-so-funny – Yeltsin dancing at a rock concert, Putin advising a journalist to get circumcised, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy fighting in

parliament, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy dowsing Boris Nemtsov with orange juice, etc. There are numerous clips from comedy shows such as KVN, but their humor is hard to grasp for an American audience. There is a very funny clip of a Putin-character taking a gypsy cab outside the Kremlin, apparently made as a promotional exercise for a computer animation company (“Taxi for Mr. Putin”).

Some excellent documentaries can also be accessed through YouTube. Posters get around the 10 minute clip limit by uploading an entire documentary in serial segments. Excellent documentaries available in Russian include: a fascinating collection “Brezhnev forbidden video” from NTV; a December 2007 report on the crushing of the opposition by REN TV (“Kak mochili oppozitsiyu”); a *Sovershenno Sekretno* special on the murder of Anna Politkovskaya; and a one-hour program on the oligarchs from Israeli TV. There are also English-language documentaries on YouTube on Chernobyl, the Rose Revolution, the Orange Revolution, the Andizhan massacre, etc.

There are numerous music videos to choose from if you want to give your students a taste of Russian popular culture. (Not to mention the samplings of opera, ballet, movies, animations, etc.) I often play these at the very beginning of the class, as students are filing in, or during the intermission in a long class. Students are used to learning about Russia through abstract categories (Leninism, Cold War, authoritarianism, etc.) supplemented by the stereotypes of Hollywood – KGB thugs and mafia killers (all aboard for “Trans-Siberian”). Few students in a political science class will have actually been to Russia themselves. So it’s good to remind them that there is a Russian society beyond the concepts and clichés. When YouTube opened its Russian site ([www.ruyoutube.com](http://www.ruyoutube.com)) in November 2007, the most popular video the first week was a whimsical song called “Guitar,” made by Peter Nalitch and a bunch of friends fooling around at a dacha.<sup>2</sup> It’s sung in English, and neatly captures the sense of personal freedom that Americans may not realize is present in contemporary Russia. Watching it reminded me of the observation of numerous Baby Boomer Russians – from liberal party leader Grigorii Yavlinsky to former defense minister Sergei Ivanov – that they learned what freedom was back in the 1960s by deciphering Beatles lyrics. My students enjoy watching hits by top artists such as DDT, Leningrad, or Kino. The rappers Mnogotochie have made some very political songs (“Beslan,” “Vremya Rossii”). You can also throw in some classics from the 1970s such as Alla Pugachev’s “Harlequin” – if only to show how far Russia has come in a short time. Playing Zemfira’s hit song “SPID” can be a way to introduce a discussion of the AIDS crisis, and you can also point out that the singer is a Muslim woman from Bashkortostan. Moving on to more political topics, there are many videos that illustrate a song with carefully selected photos or video clips. Oleg Gazmanov’s “I was born in the USSR,” while a grating nationalist anthem, comes with a series of photos that provides a glossary of 75 years of Soviet imagery. For a more jaundiced take on Soviet nostalgia, try “Born in the USSR” by the rock group DDT. There is plenty of national-patriotic music out there, most notably from the top group Lyube.

There are dangers to using YouTube in the classroom, of course. Because it is fun and easy, the amount of class time devoted to video clips may creep up to an excessive level. Students may be amused by the videos without learning anything from them: a professor will be able to see things in the clips that inexperienced students may be oblivious to, and that may need to be pointed out. Then there is what one might call the Leni Riefenstahl problem – viewers may get carried away by the emotional or aesthetical appeal of the moving images and uncouple their critical faculties, which can provide an opening for some interesting classroom discussion. (There is also a risk that

---

<sup>2</sup> In November 2006 a rival Russian video-sharing site was created, [www.rutube.ru](http://www.rutube.ru). It was acquired by the Kremlin-friendly Gazprom Media in 2008.

the professor will spend way too much time trolling through YouTube looking for usable material.) But overall YouTube is a most welcome addition to the range of tools in the teacher's arsenal.