

HOW A HANDFUL OF GEEKS DEFIED THE USSR

LE 13 MARS 2011 OLIVIER TESQUET

When twenty years ago Gorbachev was faced with the challenge of a coup, only one channel was able to survive Soviet censorship. This is the story of how Usenet invented online activism.

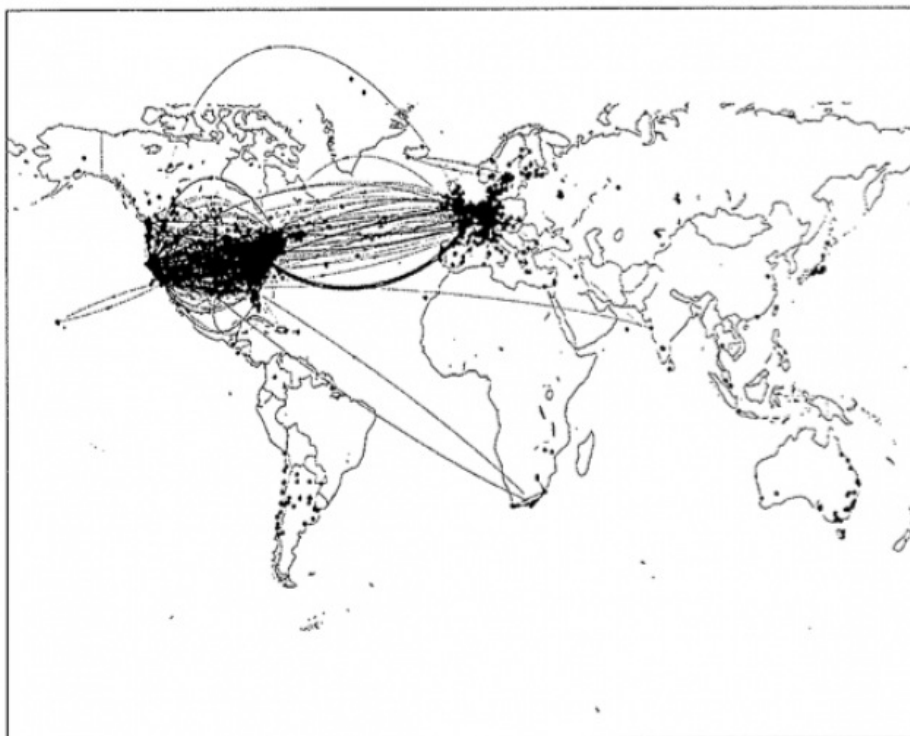
OWNI is at **SXSW** ! For the occasion, we offer you some of our articles translated in English. Enjoy !/-)

USSR, August 19 1991: While Mikhaïl Gorbachev was on holiday in his *datcha* located in Crimea, Eight apparatchiks **attempted to seize power over the state**. Hostile to reforms, the “Gang of Eight” tried to prevent the Perestroika reforms and the loss of their satellite states. These eight orthodox Communists launched an attempted *coup d'état* by installing themselves as The State Committee of the State of Emergency. After Gorbachev returned he tried to restore order and save face, but it was clear that this episode would eventually lead to his downfall.

In this well documented event, there is an interesting historically episode which is often overlooked. During the two days of the coup the Russian media was shut down, and thus not covering Boris Yeltsin ranting on top of a tank for the crowd, nor the shock of the international community. All channels were blacked-out except for one; **Usenet**, which is the grandfather of chat-rooms and is capable of surviving without the Internet. For these precious 48 hours, a few dozen individuals contributed to this last means of communication with the outside world.

Information exchange with Helsinki

How did they manage to accomplish this feat? During the time, Relcom (Reliable Communications) was a small independent network which operated without state funding. It's clients provided their own modems and paid a fee of 20,000 rubles for the service (similar to the current **OpenLeaks project**). Overall it connected 400 organizations in over 70 Soviet cities, using **UNIX** and Usenet to exchange information.



In August 1990, Relcom partnered with EUnet, the ancestor of the Internet Service Providers. This small soviet project, rendered viable by Glasnost, was then accessible to the rest of the world. It connected to an office in Helsinki, which exchanged information once per hour (a similar concept to the **FDN** project in Egypt). Ironically this initiative was made possible by the **Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy**, a prestigious Russian research program.

Thus the first cyber-activists were able to use this decentralized architecture and Usenet (developed in the USSR in 1982) to circumvent traditional censorship. **The results** resemble a more primal version of Twitter:



For those who are interested, Yeltsin's declarations to overthrow Gorbachev can be read on newsgroup Usenet talk.politics.soviet

<USENET> 11h45 – 3 divisions of the red army have rejoined the Yeltsin camp.

<Scofield> Information confirmed. Source: Radio City News, 15h GMT +3, Helsinki, Finland

<USENET> Posted on news-server@kremvax.hq.demos.su

<USENET> A man has been killed by the military in Riga, the night when Gorbachev vacated Crimea

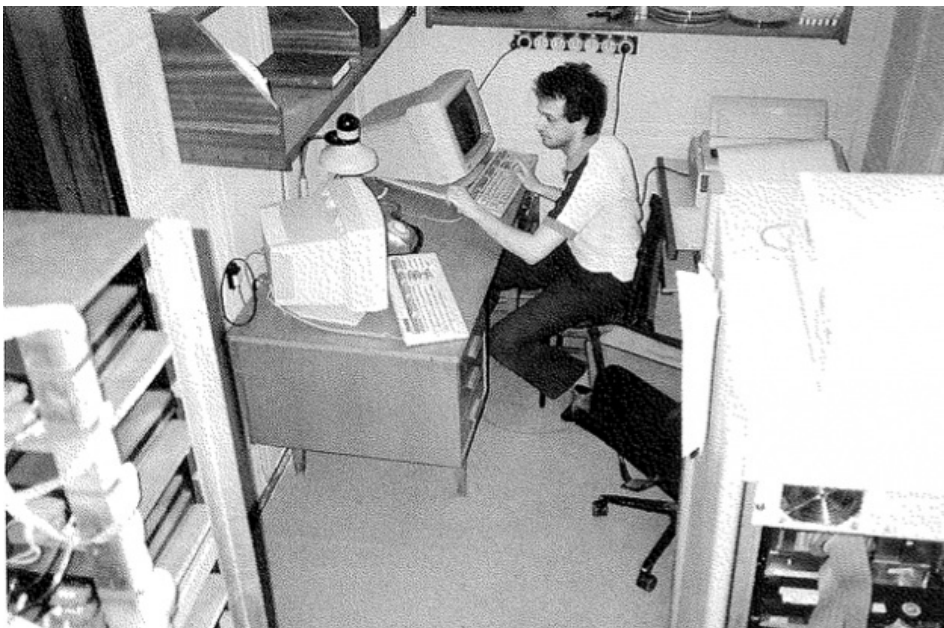
<USENET> An arrest warrant has been issued for Boris Yeltsin. It's the first time. The source is NBC.

<Scofield> Information service in Finland – sent at 16h: The EU convened for an emergency meeting on Friday. Mitterrand tried to call Gorbachev several times.

<nuts> 200,000 protesters in Leningrad. 400,000 in Chisinau (capital of Moldova)



“They forgot”



Nearly twenty years before the coining of the term “Twitter revolution,” when the web didn’t really exist and the concept of an Internet connection at home was still in its infancy, Usenet was paving the road for the technology we depend on today. Yet with the situation in Egypt, it is hard to ignore the similarities; some users were told not to post information on the current political situation **to avoid congesting the network**. Polina Antonova, who worked at Relcom at the time, **wrote this** during the USSR *coup d’état*:



Don't worry, we're OK, though frightened and angry. Moscow is full of tanks and military machines, I hate them. They try to close all mass media, they shutted up CNN an hour ago, Soviet TV transmits opera

and old movies. But, thanks Heaven, they don't consider RELCOM mass media or they simply forgot about it. Now we transmit information enough to put us in prison for the rest of our life :-)



This excerpt, written while the USSR was rapidly dissolving, attests that there is a historical reality to the web being used as a tool in political struggles.

Photo credits: Relcom archives, Flickr CC [iamtheo](#)

TONY

le 14 mars 2011 - 19:44 • SIGNALER UN ABUS - PERMALINK



I've always thought of usenet as part of the internet.

I guess NNTP and probably FTP don't count for you, only HTTP?

Whateves.

VOUS AIMEZ 0 VOUS N'AIMEZ PAS 0

LUI RÉPONDRE

GUY MAC

le 15 mars 2011 - 19:43 • SIGNALER UN ABUS - PERMALINK



I think you mean IRC, not Usenet?

VOUS AIMEZ 0 VOUS N'AIMEZ PAS 0

LUI RÉPONDRE

5 pings

How a handful of geeks defied the USSR » Article » OWNI, Digital Journalism | Maszman Speaks! le 14 mars 2011 - 20:19

[...] *How a handful of geeks defied the USSR » Article » OWNI, Digital Journalism.* [...]

Article: How a handful of geeks defied the USSR » Article » OWNI, Digital Journalism « Només 5 línies le 15 mars 2011 - 18:42

[...] *a handful of geeks defied the USSR » Article » OWNI, Digital Journalism*
<http://owni.fr/2011/03/13/how-a-handful-of-geeks-defied-the-ussr/> LikeBe the first to like this [...]

Fotos en contexto « And now, bring me that horizon.... le 16 mars 2011 - 9:26

[...] *Fotos en contexto 16 marzo 2011 Arnau Fuentes Deja un comentario Ir a los comentarios Coronel Ivan Istochnikov Ayer, Pere comentó un enlace a un artículo que hablaba de la madre de las revoluciones 2.0: el golpe de estado que propició la caída del bloque soviético: How a handful of geeks defied the USSR.* [...]

My links for March 20, 2011 | 3 sides of the table le 20 mars 2011 - 16:32

[...] *How a handful of geeks defied the USSR* [...]

Does "its" require an apostrophe in French? | Bad Apostrophes le 21 mars 2011 -

14:50

[...] This article, originally written in French, commits the classic error of adding an apostrophe to the possessive "its." "It's clients provided their own modems" [...]