

## **USING INTERNET TECHNOLOGIES IN LEGAL PRACTICES AND STUDIES IN RUSSIA**

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**Abstract.** This paper is devoted to the agenda of using computer and Internet technologies in legal practices and studies in Russia. Despite the obvious necessity for professionals to learn English, many graduates in Russia still demonstrate a very poor command of this universal language. And it has become quite impossible for a lawyer (or for any other specialist) to work effectively without using the Internet and for a student – to study and to practice a foreign language.

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It is no secret that new technologies made it possible for professionals in Russia to communicate on an international level. It happened mostly due to certain political and economical changes in the country that in turn led to diversification, unrestricted information interchange and distribution of foreign scholarly and educational press. Thus proficiency in foreign languages obviously opens up new educational, cultural and professional possibilities.

And it is especially important to have a good command of English – the language of international communication.

English is the main language of scholarly press, business negotiations and documents. Moreover it would be quite impossible to use computer technologies in general and Internet technologies in particular if you do not know this universal language.

However despite the obvious necessity for professionals to learn English, many graduates in Russia still demonstrate a very poor command of this language. One of the main reasons for such unfortunate circumstance is the lack of motivation to study any foreign language, as well as limited educational resources. In other words, a modern teacher of a foreign language in a Russian institution of higher education will inevitably come to the conclusion that traditional forms of interacting with students ought to be changed and changed radically (Kress, 2003). Let me try to examine this problem in relation to law students.

Does a lawyer need to have a good command of a foreign language? It is a rhetorical question – he or she certainly does. But does this lawyer need to know how to work with the Internet? Twenty years ago many lawyers in Russia still did not know anything about the existence of computers, notwithstanding e-mails and web-searches. Is this an excuse for today's mass computer illiteracy? This is definitely not. The world has changed and the people must change with it. And it has become quite impossible for a lawyer to work effectively without using the Internet and for a student of law – to study and to practice a foreign language.

World Wide Web opens for its users the universe of unlimited opportunities. A lawyer who has a good command of the English language and is a confident Internet user will always be able to contact his foreign colleagues promptly, to find a required statute in a foreign legislative data base, e.g.<sup>1)</sup> or to take part in an international teleconference. In other words,

Internet helps lawyers to work more proficiently. But what about students - does it help or distract? (Prichard, 2007).

Many teachers believe that students use Internet solely for idle talking or for downloading somebody else's papers (Sutherland-Smith, 2008). Is this really so? Let us not be so maximalistic and unfair. The problem is that in Russia many institutions of higher education have no opportunity (due to certain financial difficulties) to subscribe to foreign press and purchase new books. It is obvious that in this case most students of law of such universities will not be able to work with new publications in the world of international legal literature and will not be able to read many interesting legal articles published in foreign newspapers and magazines.

Thereby we can be sure that Internet helps students to practice foreign languages, because even to find a certain article on the web-site of "The Times" newspaper one needs to have a good command of English language.

At the present moment the legal Internet of the United States of America is considered to be the most developed on the Web. Any lawyer or any law student who demonstrates a high level of language competence will be able to work with the data in the legislative data base, find by-laws, general legal news and information on government services. It is not necessary to mention the importance of such resources for the students specialising on the legal system of the United States of America. In American e-libraries students can find reports on almost all trials that have taken place in the USA since 1990. For example Legal Information Institute: Supreme Court Collection features a collection of nearly all opinions issued since May 1990, as well as a current schedule, a gallery of justices, and a glossary.<sup>2)</sup> Besides some basic information on trials and judiciary panel, such web-sites also feature different background and reference materials, concise dictionaries of law, information on non-governmental and nonprofit organizations dealing with legal issues, etc. Such catering for ordinary people (including those who

are not the residents of the United States of America) is typical of all governmental resources of the legal American Internet.

It is also noteworthy that according to the American legislation agreements and contracts concluded over the Internet are valid. What is more, at the moment law-makers are discussing the possibility of holding trials online. Therefore the importance of a modern lawyer having a good command of the English language and using international legal resources effectively is almost vital. Of course, there is a chasm between the developed online legislature of the United States of America and feeble attempts to streamline these fields of activity in Russia. Though the situation is not hopeless and the prospects are rather optimistic. The government of the Russian Federation with the assistance of the President of the Russian Federation is taking steps to introduce online technologies into all public domains. Such strategy is supported by the federal goal-oriented programme “Russia Online” (“Elektronnaya Rossia”) which was elaborated to provide a regulatory legal database in the sphere of information and communication technologies, develop the information and telecommunication infrastructure, form the conditions for unlimited and accessible Internet connection and guarantee the effective interaction between government and local authorities and citizens and managing subjects.<sup>3)</sup>

However it does not mean that students studying law in Russia should not pay attention to language studies. On the contrary, now in the age of educational globalization it is high time the language barrier was surmounted. Unfortunately the level of language training in non-linguistic universities is usually very low. Students in general and law students in particular undoubtedly need to acquire basic skills of reading simple foreign texts and translating them into Russian, and such skills might even be enough to fulfill oneself in Russia, but they are definitely not enough to collaborate effectively with international organizations.

Evidently the process of educational globalization presumes that students of non-linguistic universities need adequate language training. That is why the main goal of a modern language teacher in Russia is to use foreign Internet resources in the course of language training and to motivate students to use such resources in their everyday life. But here we face another problem.

No one really knows how many people are using the Internet. It is so popular that it would be quite impossible to carry out a survey to find this out. That is why no one can say for sure whether professors (language teachers in particular) in Russia are using this technology and how it is being used.

According to teachers' feedback - at conferences, in papers and discussion forums - they seem to use Internet for just about everything: development, updating language skills, finding materials, keeping in touch with friends and colleagues, teaching, working on class projects and activities, etc. Nowadays, when it is almost impossible to live and communicate without a computer and computer technologies are becoming increasingly available in schools and universities around the globe, it is high time Russian teachers started making long-range plans for the use of computer and Internet technologies at all levels of education. It means that teachers must not only know how to use the technology, but be able to use it creatively.

The Internet allows both teaching professionals and students almost instant access to a vast amount of materials, as well as detailed information about many educational institutions and distance-learning courses currently available worldwide. Clearly, this is faster and much more convenient than 'traditional' methods of finding the same information.

Moreover, any teacher may publish his/her materials on the Web and even create a course web site which might include for example a syllabus, a summary of lessons, notes, links to helpful sites and related research, projects done by students, assignments and many other useful materials. The interactivity of the Web allows for spontaneous feedback and helps saving

time and effort. Communication with the teacher is more efficient this way and questions can be handled and problems resolved more swiftly. Besides it is much easier to send assignments by e-mail than hand out the copies.

Of course the Internet cannot replace the classroom, or the teacher - or in fact, any of the other classroom tools that are currently in use. But it is indispensable as a source of material and an instrument for communication. In addition, the Internet has the advantages of providing up-to-date, authentic material in English (or any other foreign language), and opportunities for real communication with native and non-native speakers. It can also allow students to discover language for themselves in a more immediate way than by reading a textbook.

However, integrating technology into the classroom is not about the technology itself, but about more effective teaching and learning. Thus a teacher must not only be proficient in using computer technologies but possesses certain knowledge and skills without which it would be quite impossible to apply technology in educational environment. So it makes perfect sense that all teachers (regardless of the subject they specialise in and educational institution they work for) should meet some general education technology standards. Such knowledge and skills will definitely help them to plan and design effective learning environments and evaluation strategies that address the diverse needs of students.

Our present goal is to teach students to think critically, analyse information, communicate and work in teams, as well as to solve technical, social, economic, political, and scientific problems. Integrating information resources of the Internet and computer technologies into the modern educational process is inevitable. Modern teacher must be a technologist, evaluator, and co-learner.

Unfortunately today media literacy in Russia is not compulsory (except for some secondary schools on an experimental basis and media

orientated universities and faculties) and is facing numerous financial and technical difficulties. And though Russian education authorities are definitely enthusiastic about new media opportunities, many our schools and universities just do not have the money for modern audiovisual and Internet equipment, not to mention the fact that there are still lots of teachers who have not heard about Internet education and its possibilities. Which obviously means that there are actually few people in the field who can teach students to work with original Internet resources and, sadly, most of these few live in such large cities as Moscow and Saint Petersburg? In many cases students know much more about new technologies and use them much more effectively, than teachers.

Therefore for the time being extensive use of Internet technologies, especially in language and law studies and practices, is just a long-term outlook.

#### NOTES

1. <http://portal.unesco.org>
2. <http://supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/>
3. <http://www.elrussia.ru/>

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