

# RELIable COMMunications: Yuri Pattison

The RELCOM computer network—a contraction of “reliable communications”—was launched in the Soviet Union in 1990. When members of the Communist Party attempted a coup d’état in 1991, RELCOM was used to distribute information in support of the constitutional government, following a swift suppression of mass media. In 2010, Chelsea Manning used a later online distribution network to release classified US military documents to the public via WikiLeaks. Communications surrounding these two historic events provide the primary materials for Dublin-born, London-based artist Yuri Pattison’s *RELIable COMMunications*, an online work excerpted and adapted here for print. Curator and art critic Karen Archey was invited to respond to the piece; what materialized was the following excerpted Skype conversation, which hovers, like Pattison’s work, between the archival and the provident.

karenarchey: Can you remember the first time you heard about the Internet? How was it described to you?

yuripattison: It was described as a more complex—as in, “with pictures”—and interactive version of Aertel, which was the teletext service in Ireland. And it was expensive—you were charged by the minutes you dialed up. I remember listening to that tone a lot.

karenarchey: Do you remember it primarily as a tool for communication? As a politicized space?

yuripattison: Well, it was for information before it was for communication—I didn’t have many friends who used it, and we didn’t go online a lot. I believe we got it at home in 1996, shortly after getting a Windows 95 desktop [computer]. I remember dialing up, downloading the *Mars Attacks* website, and logging off to view it offline. <http://web.archive.org/web/20070221060158/http://marsattacks.warnerbros.com/>

yuripattison: Black background, with ... sound effects—bold move for 1996. If you look at major news organization websites from that time, they’re pretty basic. The RTE [Irish National Broadcaster] page had one image. And *The New York Times* homepage just carried a GIF of the front page that day. <http://web.archive.org/web/1996112181513/http://www.nytimes.com>

karenarchey: Speaking of *Mars Attacks*, it seems like there’s a strong association between “space stuff” and these more developed early web designs. Remember that iconic *Space Jam* website? [www.warnerbros.com/spacejam/movie/jam.htm](http://www.warnerbros.com/spacejam/movie/jam.htm)

yuripattison: Completely. I think a lot of that aspiration has carried through, too. Science fiction fans ended up being the ones making this technology—they programmed and shipped you your Windows 95 PC with the “flying through space screen saver,” and later, your MacBook with the “galaxy” default wallpaper. That’s a major interest

for me, how aspirations from fantasy can filter through into the development of these technologies. The video calls that are part of everyday life now were famously prophesied in 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. Objects and services contain those aspirations, and I’m interested in how they are actively marketed as “the future” today, while there’s a definite discrepancy between those ideas and what the world actually looks like around us—an aspirational gap between digital environments and a relatively gray reality. And of course you don’t get more sci-fi than mass surveillance.

karenarchey: Do you think these connections between science fiction, our public imaginary, and the marketing of new technology are insidious or “dangerous” in any way?

yuripattison: I think public aspirations can be manipulated, certainly, and a totally aspirational, science fiction model is definitely dangerous in its de facto simplicity. I’m certainly not convinced that technology is a wholly good thing, and that it’s how people use [technology] that is the problem.

karenarchey: This leads me to wonder whether aspirational science fiction could be manipulated to [alter] the public reception of issues like mass surveillance or even the trial of Chelsea Manning.

yuripattison: I think that the main issue surrounding the Chelsea Manning case is one of dehumanization.

karenarchey: As in, we fail to see her as a person because she’s caught up in an ideological narrative? Something that the *RELIable COMMunications* project does very well is it humanizes Manning, even if it’s just by introducing her screen name, “bradass87.”

yuripattison: Well, it just presents the raw data. The human is within that data. But that is a point I wanted to make: beyond the spun mainstream information, you can access unprocessed and

unmediated chunks of historical data and get another perspective entirely. So the Soviet coup chat logs actually read like science fiction to me—they almost present an alternate reality to written/accepted history, and the data that was there has many more echoes with the present. Of course, the Internet has great potential to provide primary source data, but we’re often blinded by the sheer volume of it all, or unable to find its proper context. I was interested in the Manning chat log because it was so personal and private. The historical chat logs were equally deeply personal, but there they were in a very public forum—a dynamic that I think has changed in our use of the Internet today.

karenarchey: I was blown away by the fact that I was able to access Manning’s court transcripts hours after each session ended. And after I slogged through reading countless pages of transcripts, riddled with errata, I kind of understood why people don’t do it more often. It’s a pain in the ass. But in a way it almost feels like a public responsibility to look at and access this information.

yuripattison: I guess that’s the dilemma we now face: if the Internet has eroded traditional investigative journalism, then when we want to find “truths” we’ve got to do it ourselves. Perhaps that puts the artist in an interesting place. Not that I’m not proposing this as a model to replace the journalist!

Yuri Pattison is an artist working with, and creating, subjective datasets. He is currently thinking about collapse. Taking shape as an archival website designed to change and develop over a six-month period, Pattison’s *RELIable COMMunications* was commissioned by Legion TV, London, and has been featured as part of the New Museum’s *First Look: New Art Online* series. [www.reliablecommunications.net](http://www.reliablecommunications.net)



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Date: Fri, 06 Sep 91 21:19:16 PDT  
>From: Tom Lincoln <lincoln@iris.rand.org>  
Subject: The REAL RISKS and REWARDS of E-Mail (By Larry Press)

The LA Times of Sept 6 ran an article on the DEMOS network in Moscow as it operated during the coup attempt. Larry Press, who played a major role, felt that this article did not do justice to the full set of facts. Here is his version:

----- Forwarded Message

Date: Fri 6 Sep 91 11:46:51-PDT  
>From: Laurence I. Press <LPRESS@ISI.EDU>  
To: lincoln@iris.rand.org

Copyright, Larry Press, August 26, 1991, do not reproduce or quote without permission. This file may be forwarded around the net as long as this note is attached.

A Computer Network for Democracy and Development  
Larry Press

Oh, do not say. I've seen the tanks with my own eyes. I hope we'll be able to communicate during the next few days. Communists cannot rape the Mother Russia once again!"

This message was sent from Moscow at 5:01 AM on August 19. It was written by 26 year-old Vadim Antonov, a senior programmer at the Demos Cooperative in the Soviet Union. Demos operates a computer-based communication network which spans the Soviet Union, and within a few hours, Vadim's message had been relayed to computers in 70 Soviet cities from Leningrad in the West to Vladivostok in the East.

The message had also been sent to a computer in Helsinki Finland, which is connected to the non-Soviet computer networks. From Finland, the message was relayed to networks such as The Internet, serving millions of users on all continents. Seconds after it reached Finland, I could read it at my computer in Los Angeles, California. The message was particularly important to me because the week before the coup attempt I had been in Moscow and spent several days with Vadim and his colleagues at Demos. We met professionally and as friends.

Demos' RELCOM (RELIable COMMunication) network celebrated the first birthday of its link to Finland on August 22. During that first year, RELCOM spread to 70 Soviet cities, and over 400 organizations were using it -- universities, research institutes, stock and commodity exchanges, news services, high schools, politicians, and government agencies. As is typical with computer networks, noone knows how many users RELCOM actually reaches.

During the Coup

During the days of the coup, RELCOM was pressed into service in support of the constitutional government. The junta moved quickly to control mass media. When I learned of the coup, I immediately sent a worried message to Vadim's wife Polina Antonova, who also works at Demos. I did not receive her answer until August 20 at 12:17 AM Moscow time:

"Dear Larry,

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 stopped CNN an hour ago, and Soviet TV transmits opera and movies. But, thank Heaven, they don't know how to use computers or they simply forget

Cheers,  
Polina."

The Demos staff had learned of the coup attempt on the 19th, and immediately began sending political news to the Soviet Union and the outside world. By 12:30 PM, Moscow time, the first news releases from the independent Soviet news agency Interfax, although outlawed by the junta, news from Interfax, the Radio Moscow World Service, the Russian Information Agency, Northwest Information Agency (Leningrad), and Baltfax was disseminated by





saying hey, check your submissions for x...

(03:02:03 PM) info@adrianlamo.com <AUTO-REPLY>: I'm not here right now

(03:02:19 PM) bradass87: s/you/so

(03:03:38 PM) bradass87: iono, im not so paranoid... ive seen the way the system works, and the way the public reacts, and the way the PR people react... ive never felt threatened

(03:06:10 PM) bradass87: i dont know whats wrong with me...

(03:07:01 PM) bradass87: i just... couldnt let these things stay inside of the system... and inside of my head...

(03:07:26 PM) bradass87: i recognized the value of some things

(03:07:33 PM) bradass87: knew what they meant... dug deeper

(03:07:53 PM) bradass87: i watched that video cold, for instance

(03:10:32 PM) bradass87: at first glance... it was just a bunch of guys getting shot up by a helicopter... no big deal... about two dozen more where that came from right... but something struck me as odd with the van thing... and also the fact it was being stored in a JAG officer's directory... so i looked into it... eventually tracked down the date, and then the exact GPS co-ord... and i was like... ok, so thats what happened... cool... then i went to the regular internet... and it was still on my mind... so i typed into goog... the date, and the location... and then i see this <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/13/world/middleeast/13iraq.html>

(03:11:07 PM) bradass87: i kept that in my mind for weeks... probably a month and a half... before i forwarded it to them

(03:11:54 PM) bradass87: then there was the Finkel book

(03:12:16 PM) bradass87: im almost certain he had a copy

(03:12:16 PM) info@adrianlamo.com <AUTO-REPLY>: I'm not here right now

(03:13:31 PM) bradass87: it was unreal... i mean, i've identified bodies before... its rare to do so, but usually its just some nobody

(03:13:48 PM) bradass87: it humanized the whole thing... re-sensitized me

(03:15:38 PM) bradass87: i dont know... im just, weird i guess

(03:15:49 PM) bradass87: i cant separate myself from others

(03:16:12 PM) bradass87: i feel connected to everybody... like they were distant family

(03:16:24 PM) bradass87: i... care?

(03:17:27 PM) bradass87: [http://www.kxol.com.au/images/pale\\_blue\\_dot.jpg](http://www.kxol.com.au/images/pale_blue_dot.jpg) <- sums it up for me

(03:18:17 PM) bradass87: i probably shouldn't have read sagan, feynman, and so many intellectual authors last summer

(03:21:11 PM) bradass87: >sigh<

(03:22:14 PM) info@adrianlamo.com: i get that

(03:22:45 PM) bradass87: get what... that connection?

(03:23:38 PM) info@adrianlamo.com: yeah.

(03:24:08 PM) info@adrianlamo.com: which is why i'm sad for the people i sometimes have to hurt.

(03:24:10 PM) bradass87: we're human... and we're killing ourselves... and no-one seems to see that... and it bothers

(03:24:26 PM) bradass87: apathy

(03:25:28 PM) bradass87: apathy is far worse than the active participation

(03:26:23 PM) bradass87: >hug<

(03:29:31 PM) bradass87: <http://vimeo.com/5081720> Elie Wiesel summed it up pretty well for me... though his story is much more important than mine

(03:29:48 PM) bradass87: \*than

(03:31:33 PM) bradass87: I prefer a painful truth over any blissful fantasy.

(03:31:48 PM) bradass87: s/a/the

(03:32:05 PM) info@adrianlamo.com: \*hugback\*

(03:34:16 PM) bradass87: !!

(03:35:44 PM) bradass87: i think ive been traumatized too much by reality, to care about consequences of shattering the fantasy

(03:36:18 PM) bradass87: not brave, im weak

(03:39:00 PM) info@adrianlamo.com: sometimes they're the same thing

(03:40:33 PM) info@adrianlamo.com: brb

(03:40:43 PM) bradass87: k

(03:52:34 PM) bradass87: like i think ive said before... im not so much scared of getting caught and facing consequences at this point... as i





IRC Log started Thu Jan 17 03:03  
 <umfonta6> bombs are dropping in baghdad  
 <hstanley> jeeesh  
 <spangod> am i getting through?  
 <CaptainJ> CNN HAS THE SCOOP!  
 <umfonta6> cbc  
 <Lipstick> Wow! why is everyone leaving?  
 #Breeze# has CNN on  
 <spam> Breeze has CNN on  
 <umfonta6> bbc  
 <BOY> SHIT!  
 <Mix> link death????  
 <Arkie> present is presently forming an official response.  
 <Mark> spam:yes  
 <Mosiah> still got over 60 here  
 <Arkie> this channel name is fairly oxymorninical.  
 <spam> koala\* 20 minnutes since first attack  
 <spangod> thanks  
 <hstanley> who's in baghdad here?  
 <Mark> scoop? hah!  
 <umfonta6> bombs are happening  
 <BlackMist> 79  
 <Mosiah> bombs hitting the net!  
 <CaptainJ> 2 major explosions - 1 near major comm center.  
 <umfonta6> phones are going down  
 <Alexander> RE all  
 <stealth> Attack started at 2:30am baghdad time.  
 <ephrem> shit!  
 <Faustus> CaptainJ: WHERE??  
 <Lipstick> I dont think bagdahd is on the net =]  
 <BOY> No arab countrys on the net..  
 <Datawolf> hold for net diagnostic..  
 <Phaedrus> welost the finnish d000s  
 <Faustus> ANYBODY FROM ISRAEL HERE?  
 <CaptainJ> Bagdad - reported CNN  
 <lynx> YES  
 <umfonta6> Bombong is happening in the central city  
 <Aristotle> cap. and ... in middle east?  
 <BlackMist> 67  
 <taifun> hi  
 <Nombrist> Israel is ot!  
 <Spitzer> the war has started...  
 <lynx> fau: BOY  
 <BlackMist> 64  
 <Mosiah> another bomb  
 <BlackMist> bye  
 <Robert> Where are the bombs hitting ???  
 #shari# yes breeze we know  
 <spam> shari yes breeze we know  
 <Mark> type /who -all \* :!  
 <CaptainJ> no - watching CNN  
 <umfonta6> wheres it  
 <stealth> Boy and Ely are on from israel...  
 <BOY> Fau: I'm FROM ISRAEL!  
 <Goofa> Welp, looks like bombing big  
 <Alexander> F4 weaz...  
 <Arkie> the netload discussion is what's bobbing the net  
 network.  
 <Bellial> hi  
 <stealth> Got your gas mask ready, Boy?  
 <CaptainJ> AA-fire still going up...  
 <kimberli> did you all get...  
 <Mark> re  
 <Blitz> who  
 <Alexander> holy shit!  
 <MK> I'm from Israel too  
 <noone> sheesh  
 <Alexander> RE!  
 <HollowMan> whois will  
 <Mosiah> re all  
 <Blitz> 87!!!!!!  
 <Arkie> hi, bunny.  
 <Goofa> From what I gather, they (US) launched, from the  
 sea. Tommahawk cruise missiles so Iraq would light their  
 air defense systems.  
 <BOY> steal: yes ... and we just finished silling the house  
 from gas ...  
 <Arkie> hi additional.  
 <bunny> hi arkie  
 <CountZer0> hi

