

Citizen Journalism in Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities of the Growing Online Community

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Introduction

Certain technological innovations have changed the way societies function so fundamentally that they altered the course of history. Inventions like the printing press, telephones, radio, and computer, to name a few, all ushered in new eras in human history. The internet is one such innovation, and has already left its mark across the globe. While the internet's impact is most noticeable in more technologically advanced countries, it is increasingly changing the face of developing countries as well.

The internet facilitates information exchange to an unprecedented degree. Not only can citizens freely access materials from newspapers, statistical databases, and government sources, but increasingly people are beginning to publish original reporting as well. Citizen journalism represents the absolute democratization of information, and its ramifications are being felt by democracies and absolutist states alike.

Citizen journalism has been defined as the "act of citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information."² While this activity predates the internet, the internet has made it far easier and consequently much more widespread. "Blogs" are an especially useful and accessible tool that facilitates citizen journalism, but are by no means the only way citizens engage in journalism.

Central Asia, however, has yet to be substantially impacted by the internet, let alone any form of citizen journalism. Even compared with other developing countries, internet usage in the region is low and has been less influential than elsewhere in the world. Nonetheless, internet usage is rapidly expanding in Central Asia, and this disparity is diminishing rapidly. This paper argues that while the impact of citizen journalism has yet to be felt in Central Asia, it will be before the end of the decade.

To varying degrees, all five of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – manage the information received by their citizens. As the internet grows more pervasive, that task will become more difficult and require more resources. These countries will be forced to take a stance: follow China's lead and attempt to control the internet, or follow India's lead and allow the free exchange of information to flourish. That choice will have far-reaching consequences for each country's future.

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² "Civic Journalism vs Citizen Journalism," inside the CBC.com, 12/1/06.

This paper will attempt to contextualize recent developments in Central Asian citizen journalism (predominantly online) by: reviewing relevant theory about the impact of technology on society; describing the current state of citizen journalism in Central Asia; providing an overview of government censorship in neighboring countries with comparatively greater development of the online sphere; analyzing the measures Central Asian governments have already taken to restrict citizen journalism, or are likely to take; and relate these factors to international policy.

Theoretical Framework

In Leonard Dudley's *The Word and the Sword*, the author describes four key innovations in information processing important enough to reshape social and political institutions: writing, printing, mass circulation, and the integrated circuit.³ His work was published in 1991, the same year that CERN (a particle-physics research center in Switzerland) released the World Wide Web to the public.⁴ Had his work been published a decade later, the internet would likely have made that list.

Dudley's work provides a useful theoretical framework for this paper. From the very first civilizations to the modern period, he argues that technological innovation has shaped the boundaries of political control. He defines a state as having two fundamental characteristics: the ability to use force within a specified area and the power to levy taxes.⁵ While this may seem far removed from the study of information and communication technology (ICT), information flow determines the boundaries and optimal form of state power.

For instance, the emergence of the first writing in ancient Sumer coincided with an expansion in communal decision-making, as well as an increase in the optimal size of the political unit. In this case, the efficiencies generated by record keeping and the ability to codify laws into script allowed larger city-states to emerge.⁶

Dudley argues that this same principle explains the early success of the Soviet Union.⁷ The Leninist revolution was pioneering because it was the first to successfully systematically monopolize mass communication. While the technological breakthroughs necessary for this system were several decades old, the Soviets were the first to fully exploit them for control over their subjects.⁸ Lenin's first move in 1917 was to seize control of all newspapers, or shut down those with dissenting views.⁹

The Communist Party (renamed from the Bolshevik Party) was vital to Lenin's totalitarian model, and he layered the organization over the entire Tsarist bureaucracy. Crucial to its success was the telephone because it provided the speedy oral

³ Leonard Dudley, *The Word and the Sword*, (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1991), 9.

⁴ CERN is an abbreviation for the European Organization for Nuclear Research, derived from the French Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire (public.web.cern.ch) accessed 12/06.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 37. It should that while the invention of writing was definitely contemporaneous, it is difficult to establish causality.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 225. Competing theories explaining the early success of the Leninist revolution argue that it was circumstantial, and the result of a power vacuum or the result of Lenin's ability as a leader.

⁸ The telephone was invented in 1876, the radio (approximately) in 1896, and the Gutenberg printing press in the 1440s.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 249.

communication necessary for this dual-layer government.¹⁰ The telephone allowed a single person to monitor and inform the actions of a far greater number of people than before its invention. The 1920s saw the rapid expansion of this relatively new technology.

Absolute control of these innovations allowed the young Soviet regime not only to survive, but exert previously unseen brutality and control over its population. This model would later be reproduced by Nazi Germany and Maoist China.

The internet, in contrast, makes absolutism more costly instead of more efficient, and is much easier and cheaper for the average citizen to use. While absolutist governments can use the internet to strengthen their grip on society (as will be discussed later in this paper), the internet is proving an illusive tool to master for this purpose. Suddenly, not only can an individual choose from multiple news sources, but at no cost can create a blog and in minutes become a news outlet.¹¹ Politically disenfranchised groups are provided a tool to instantly communicate with like-minded audiences and advance agendas and issues ignored by standard news sources, thus sustaining what one author terms “counterhegemonic discourse.”¹²

An Overview of Online Citizen Journalism in Central Asia

Naturally, the argument that the internet facilitates citizen journalism and undermines systematic authoritarianism presupposes that the internet enjoys wide scale penetration into a given society. This is not the case in Central Asia.

Though internet penetration statistics vary considerably by methodology and source, Central Asia invariably ranks remarkably low, even for its GDP. For instance, by one ranking internet penetration in Central Asia is below that of Africa, and considerably below Asia as a whole.¹³ Nevertheless, internet usage – and, correspondingly, citizen journalism – is expanding rapidly in all of the former Soviet republics, albeit in very different ways and at considerably different rates in each of the five countries.

It is important to note that for the same reasons that overall internet penetration remains extremely low, those who are online are disproportionately influential. It is generally the elite that possess the technical skills necessary to use the internet and have access ready the relatively scarce and expensive connection points. According to a survey by the University of Washington including all of Central Asia except Turkmenistan, only a quarter of respondents who accessed the internet did so from home; the rest accessed the internet from either school or work.^{14 15} As a result, Central Asia’s future leaders are the segment of the population most frequently exploring the web.

¹⁰ Ibid., 251.

¹¹ A “blog” is the abbreviation of “web log.” While there are many definitions of a blog, the term technically refers to the software developed to make website maintenance quick and easy.

¹² Barney Warf and John Grimes, “Counterhegemonic Discourses and the Internet,” *Geographical Review*, 87(2), 260.

¹³ Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/index.html> (accessed on 11/24/06). According to this dataset, internet penetration as a population percentage in Central Asia is 2.7%, compared with 3.6% for Africa and 10.8% for all of Asia (which includes Central Asia).

¹⁴ “2006 CAICT Survey: Topline Results,” Central Asia + Information and Communication Technologies (CAICT) Project, Department of Technical Communication, University of Washington, Seattle, WA.

The following sections will briefly summarize the divergent situations in each of the Central Asian republics.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is the only country in Central Asia that can boast a burgeoning online community complete with an emergent community of citizen journalists. According to the OSCE, 9% of the population has access to the internet at least weekly, five percentage points more than the next highest in Central Asia. Moreover, that proportion has grown dramatically, increasing by 6% in only three years.¹⁶

The content of the Kazakh online community is analogous to that in Russia, where there is an increasingly sophisticated and widespread community of bloggers. These bloggers write almost exclusively in Russian, and most frequently on the LiveJournal platform.¹⁷ Kazakhstanis favor LiveJournal because it offers a Russian interface and because it allows them to easily interact with the preexisting Russian blogosphere. Though most bloggers use online software simply to document their personal lives and stay in touch with friends and family, they are increasingly writing about social issues and political events as well.¹⁸

For example, on May 30, 2006, the top floors of a skyscraper housing offices for various Kazakhstani ministries caught fire, bloggers posted original pictures and testimony within hours.¹⁹ KUB, a watchdog site that hosts opposition blogs, constantly serves as an alternative information source and relies on a variety of independent contributors. On April 5, 2006, riots broke out in the Shanyrak district of Alma-Ata and Kazakhstani police responded by forcefully suppressing the demonstrations. KUB posted constant updates on its site detailing the conflict complete with photos of police brutality.²⁰

Kyrgyzstan

Despite being a small country both in terms of population and territory and having low internet penetration (only 3%, according to the OSCE), Kyrgyzstan is home to the second most active Central Asian internet community on political and social issues. Even if vocal, this community is still extremely small and, like Kazakhstan, most blog in Russian or, in some cases, English, rather than the native Kyrgyz.

¹⁵ An uneven demographic is by no means unique to Central Asia; in the United States, for instance, internet users are disproportionately white and male. Warf, "Counterhegemonic Discourses on the Internet," 262.

¹⁶ Mark Skogen, "Internet Development in Central Asia and its Role as an Information Resource," (PowerPoint) Internet Access and Training Program in Central Asia, 2006.

¹⁷ LiveJournal was created in 1999, and is regarded as being used predominantly as a journal (as the title suggests) as opposed to a news source / editorial venue as are some blogs. Russia has the second greatest number of LiveJournal users after the United States, almost equaling the UK and Canada combined. (www.livejournal.com).

¹⁸ Blogs are used predominantly as personal journals throughout the world. In some countries and regions, however – the United States, Europe, India, to name a few – they are increasingly being used to discuss social issues, and sometimes as a venue for original reporting.

¹⁹ See the general LiveJournal thread at <http://community.livejournal.com/kazakhstan/50376.html#cutid1> (, accessed on 11/25/06) in Russian.

²⁰ "В Шаньраке СОЖГЛИ полицейского," KUB <http://www.kub.kz/article.php?sid=13701> (accessed on 11/25/06) in Russian.

Edil Baisalov is best known as the leader of the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society in Bishkek, an NGO started for election monitoring but now devoted to promoting human rights and civil society. He is also a prolific blogger, and offers constant commentary on Kyrgyzstani society and political affairs.²¹ Most recently, bloggers engaged in a dialogue over the new constitution signed on November 9, 2006. Baisalov largely favored the reforms, while bloggers on *neweurasia.net* (a group blog) were less optimistic.²² The two sides engaged in an online dialogue about the reforms. Baisalov also used his insight from within the opposition to debunk claims made in the media. For instance, when *Ferghana.ru* reported that the opposition had preemptively set up government positions in anticipation of the president's resignation, he wrote on his blog that these claims were completely false.²³

During the civil unrest before the new constitution was signed, Kyrgyzstani citizen journalists played a key role in reporting on the protests.²⁴ The English blog *KyrgyzReport* and the Russian language blog *The Journal of the Wandering Cat* both uploaded photos of the protests only minutes after they were taken, provided descriptions of the events, and contradicted biased television reporting. It should be noted, however, that the target audience was predominately Western, and the extent to which these blogs are read within the country is unknown.²⁵ Although this sort of exchange, critique, and reporting is standard in much of the rest of the world, it is still in its nascent stages in Central Asia.

Tajikistan

The OSCE cites Tajikistan as having greater internet access than Kyrgyzstan (4%), but other measures place Tajikistan far lower.²⁶ Moreover, according to the University of Washington's survey, more Tajikistanis reported never using the internet than any other Central Asian country except Uzbekistan.²⁷ These inconsistencies notwithstanding, Tajikistan's online community is certainly far less developed than those in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

While several Tajiks write political and social commentary on *neweurasia.net* and there are a few scattered personal weblogs, nothing exists on the scale of Kazakhstan or even Kyrgyzstan. Indeed, this comes as no surprise as Tajikistan is also the least developed country in Central Asia by most measures. In 2005, Tajikistan's per capita gross national income was \$1,260, compared with \$7,730 in Kazakhstan, and \$1,981 for Sub-Saharan Africa.²⁸

²¹ <http://baisalov.livejournal.com> (in Russian)

²² See <http://kyrgyzstan.neweurasia.net> and <http://ru.kyrgyzstan.neweurasia.net>.

²³ "Analysis Kyrgyz Blogs Play key Role in Reporting Protests," BBC Monitoring research, Global News Wire – Asia Africa Intelligence Wire, 11/10/06.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Internet World Stats puts Tajikistan at 0.1% internet penetration and Kyrgyzstan at 5.2%, a much starker difference, and based on online activity, probably more accurate.

²⁷ "2006 CAICT Survey: Topline Results."

²⁸ World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2005. These figures are in international dollars, and adjusted for purchasing power parity. It should be noted that South Africa pushes the figure for Sub-Saharan Africa up; Tajikistan's per capita GNI is about on par with Rwanda (\$1,320) or Burkina Faso (\$1,220).

Turkmenistan

There is virtually no online activity within Turkmenistan. The country is home to one of the most elaborate personality cults in the world; there is no civil society to speak of or political opposition. The proportion of the population that has regular access to the internet is lower than 1%, and those that do most likely work for the government.

Though it is not the subject of this paper, it should be noted that there is a fairly active online Turkmen diaspora community. Several websites regularly discuss current events, culture, and social issues in Turkmenistan.²⁹ Because they write in Russian and they have no readers within the country, their target audience by default is Turkmen living abroad.

Uzbekistan

While only 3% of Uzbekistanis use the internet regularly, because Uzbekistan is Central Asia's most populous country, its citizens still make up the largest group of internet users in the region.³⁰ For the most part these internet users are not bloggers and do not discuss politics or social issues – largely for political reasons that will be discussed later in this paper.

Nevertheless, sizable communities devoted to discussing recreational activities do exist. For instance, two group blogs – Blog Afisha and The All-Knowing Blog – serve as a venue for young Tashkent citizens to interact online and discuss gossip, musical events in the city, Western celebrities, cultural events, or any other light topic that strikes their interest.³¹ Though a far cry from some of the online activists that have sprung up in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, these communities are nevertheless significant. Their subject matter is generally non-controversial, but the structure and method of these blogs is nearly identical to those elsewhere in the world, and more active and widespread than those in Kyrgyzstan, and perhaps even Kazakhstan. The blogs unite like-minded, educated young people who, if not for these online venues, might never meet, share ideas, and organize. Should the political climate change in Uzbekistan, existing structures such as these make citizen journalism likely to take root very rapidly.

Indeed, in specific situations, another communication – the cell phone – has been used as a tool of citizen journalists. While the internet is an increasingly prominent and important venue for citizen journalism, it is by no means the only one, and the cell phone is much more widespread throughout Central Asian society. Cell phones were used to spread the word of Uzbekistani government repression in the Ferghana Valley in November, 2004, and succeeded in mobilizing demonstrations several thousand strong.³²

²⁹ See Karakum (<http://karakum.blogspot.com/>) and Paikhas (<http://turkmeny.blogspot.com/>), both in Russian.

³⁰ Mark Skogen, "Internet Development in Central Asia and its Role as an Information Resource," (PowerPoint) Internet Access and Training Program in Central Asia, 2006.

³¹ See Blog Afisha (<http://blog.afisha.uz/>) and the All Knowing Blog (<http://blog.vse.uz/>), both in Russian.

³² Eric McGlinchey, "Avoiding the Great Game and Domestic Unrest in Eurasia," PONARS Policy Memo No. 402, Center for Strategic and International Studies (December 2005), 2.

They were also used both to organize protests in Andijon in May 2005, and, following the subsequent massacre, to spread the word of government brutality.³³

Precedents in Government Intervention

Lawrence Lessig comments in *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* that the common notion that the internet is inherently an instrument of freedom and knowledge stems from the happenstance that it has to date not been extensively regulated in the countries that use it most.³⁴ While regulation of the internet requires substantial technical resources, it is by no means impossible, and certain governments are making great headway in regaining public control of internet content. Before examining government intervention in Central Asia, it is useful to review existing models of government regulation in countries where internet use is more widespread. Internet usage is expanding rapidly in Central Asia, and eventually the governments will have to make pivotal decisions about the role they will or will not play in shaping the online sphere. Those choices will have important consequences for the development of the respective country as a whole.

China

China has 94 million internet users, the third largest number after the European Union and the United States.³⁵ It is also probably the most notorious country for internet censorship because of the deal made between China and the Google search engine in early 2006. In order to keep operating in China, Google agreed to open a China-specific search engine, www.google.cn, which would filter out certain search results as specified by the Chinese government.³⁶ The reputation China gained from this publicized debacle is well deserved, as, in the words of one report on the subject, “China’s internet filtering regime is the most sophisticated of its kind in the world.”³⁷ In short, China’s censorship of the internet is far more expansive than a few search results blocked in Google.

China filters an expansive and dynamic list of websites, especially targeting banned topics such as Falun Gong, Taiwan, Tibet, and any other sites considered to be subversive. A great deal of self-censorship is expected as well. Internet cafes are expected to install software on computers to block any material deemed sensitive.³⁸ They are also required to record customer information and keep logs detailing which websites were visited by whom, and to submit that information to the Public Security Bureau.³⁹

³³ Ibid., 2. In May 2005, 2,000 people protesting against the Uzbek government seized control of the prison and the regional administration building in the eastern city of Andijan. The government retaliated with force, and reported 169 people killed; independent reporters put the number between 400 and 600.

³⁴ Lawrence Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*, (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

³⁵ Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/index.html> (accessed on 11/24/06).

³⁶ “Google to censor itself in China,” CNN (www.cnn.com, 6/26/06).

³⁷ “Internet Filtering in China in 2004-2005: A Country Study,” (OpenNet Initiative, 2005), 3.

³⁸ Ibid., 11.

³⁹ Ibid., 12.

Chinese servers host an estimated 600,000 bloggers, some of whom do seem to qualify as citizen journalists.⁴⁰ The Chinese government pursues a multi-pronged strategy to control the content of these information sources as well by filtering out certain key words and exerting control over domestic blog hosts. Furthermore, China has on numerous occasions jailed dissidents who have posted materials on the web critical of the regime.⁴¹

Iran

Like China, Iran has a large and growing community of bloggers and employs sophisticated technical interventions to control internet content.⁴² Unlike China, Iran has been taking steps not only to censor the internet, but co-opt the blogging phenomenon for its own purposes.

The most infamous example of this trend is, of course, the blog of Iran's own head of state, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, launched in August of this year.⁴³ Even as opposition and independent blogs are blocked and bloggers are arrested, the Iranian government has established an "office of religious web log expansion."⁴⁴ So far, over 300 clerics and religious students are enrolling in classes offered by this governmental unit, presumably to set up their own pro-Mullah, pro-State web logs.

India

China and Iran are two countries that responded to the rise of citizen journalism by controlling it, and in the case of Iran, subverting it for state propaganda. India, however, represents an alternative model. India has a history of a boisterous and independent press, and is now home to at least 40,000 bloggers, many of whom write regularly on political and cultural issues.⁴⁵ In July of this year the Indian government was confronted with the same challenges posed by an emergent community of independent journalists and challenged the blogging community in response. In stark contrast to China and Iran, however, the Indian government ultimately backed down.

Following the bombing of a Mumbai commuter train that killed some 200 people in July, 2006, the Indian government decided to crack down on blogs by religious and political extremists. Instead, of shutting down only the offending blogs, however, access to many of the most popular blog hosts were shut down completely.⁴⁶ Facing widespread outrage and protest facilitated by the very technologies the government was attacking, the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 47.

⁴¹ Jane McCartney, "Blogger jailed for backing elections," *Times Online*, 5/17/06.

⁴² Farsi is the second most used language in the blogosphere, even though it is only the twenty-eighth most spoken language. "Mullahs versus the bloggers," *TimesOnline*, 12/23/06.

⁴³ "Iran's president launches weblog," BBC, 8/14/06. Ahmadinejad's blog is available in English at <http://www.ahmadinejad.ir/>.

⁴⁴ "Iran's clerics caught up in blogging craze," *Guardian Unlimited*, 10/11/06.

⁴⁵ "Bloggers' fury as India blocks sites," *GuardianUnlimited*, 7/19/06.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Indian government ultimately backed down, issuing a statement that the widespread blockage was a mistake, and only specific sites were intended to be shut down.⁴⁷

This case provides an example of the powerful force online communities can pose to governments that try to take away their freedom. In contrast, China and Iran have largely succeeded in this endeavor, but had to expend substantial resources to achieve their goal.

Government Censorship in Central Asia

The central argument of this paper is that – because technologies that facilitate citizen journalism have yet to significantly penetrate Central Asia – governments in the region have not been forced to define an internet policy. However, that fact will change within years, not decades, and Central Asian governments will be forced to make a choice: devote substantial resources to subverting and / or filtering the internet, as China and Iran have done, or step back and allow online dialogue to flourish.

There is good reason to believe that citizen journalism will take root very quickly in Central Asia. The Soviet Union left Central Asia with an extremely educated population, especially given the relative level of development in the region. Despite the fact that many of the Central Asian countries have gross national incomes comparable to Sub-Saharan Africa, all of them have literacy rates approaching 100%.⁴⁸ Although the USSR also left Central Asia with a more unfortunate legacy – a long tradition of press censorship – this is also true both of Russia and Iran, where citizen journalism has grown in leaps and bounds.

Despite the fact that the principle means of citizen journalism are not yet widely available – in the context of this paper, namely the internet – it is already clear which governments will adopt a strategy of censorship and which ones will allow the internet to develop organically when the concept does take off; some countries are already grappling with the issue. So far at least, the online sphere remains generally freer than print journalism in all of the five countries except Turkmenistan.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is among the minority of Central Asian states with a history of systematic filtering of objectionable internet content, a distinction it shares with Uzbekistan.⁴⁹ KUB, an opposition web-log discussed previously, has been subject to periodic blocks, though it is currently accessible from within Kazakhstan.⁵⁰ Another website, Navigator.kz made the mistake of publishing an interview with a Geneva prosecutor alleging that President Nazarbayev had a Swiss bank account. Its domain

⁴⁷ “Politics & Economics: After Protests, India Clarifies Order to Block Blogs,” The Wall Street Journal, 7/20/06.

⁴⁸ World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2005. For this same reason, Dennis De Tray, former World Bank country director for Central Asia, has argued that Central Asia has great potential for development more generally. “Central Asia: Historical Legacies, Future Challenges” (presentation), 3/7/06.

⁴⁹ “Special Report: Kyrgyzstan” OpenNet Initiative, 2/2005, 1.

⁵⁰ Personal correspondence with internet-users living in Kazakhstan. Other sites that are or have been filtered include: Respublika.kz, Navigator.kz,

name and several alternates were shut down, forcing it to adopt the name Navi.kz.⁵¹ Later, even that domain name was prohibited, forcing the organization to morph into Mizinov.net, and finally into Zonakz.net, which is currently unblocked. Nevertheless, despite some level of systematic filtering, internet in Kazakhstan remains relatively free. The country has certainly yet to go down the path of repressive countries like China, or even Uzbekistan.

Outright blockage of websites is not the only way to suppress citizen journalism. As in other Central Asian countries, rumors abound of government secret service agents who harass members of the online community, goading them to reveal their true feelings about the government. While these stories are for the most part unsubstantiated, it is indicative of a more general climate of suspicion and paranoia in Kazakhstan, as well as the rest of Central Asia. Citizens are often loathe to engage in the online community for fear of government persecution.

Because Kazakhstan is home to by far the largest online community of citizen journalists, the debate about how to deal with the trend is already underway. In September of this year the Kazakhstani parliament drafted a law to regulate social interaction in the online sphere.⁵² The bill for the most part seeks to define basic concepts relating to the internet in legal terms such as “website.” However, the legislation also specifies what kind of activity is considered to be under the government’s purview, and what qualifies as government property. Furthermore, the bill requires any material that meets the specified definition of being sufficiently relevant to the state to be registered in a new system set up by the law; any materials falling outside of this specification can be registered on a voluntary basis.

The current absence of an official definition of various forms of online activity has not, however, prevented Kazakhstani authorities from distinguishing themselves as the first Central Asian government to prosecute a blogger. In December 2006 the trial of Kazis Toguzbaev, a blogger and retired general in the Kazakhstani army, was initiated under the charge that Tugozbaev had insulted the “character and dignity” of the Kazakhstani president.⁵³ To warrant this charge, Toguzbaev had reminisced in a publicly available online journal about his days in the army, and wrote that President Nazarbayev determined the verdict for the Altynbek Sarsenbaev murder trial long before the court had given the verdict. (Sarsenbaev was an opposition leader murdered in February 2006 shortly after the December presidential elections.)

Despite the fact that both the internet and citizen journalism are more developed in Kazakhstan than they are anywhere else in Central Asia, it remains unclear what direction the country will take. Legislation is in the books that may restrict the online sphere, and certain websites are blocked, yet Kazakhstan cares deeply about being seen as a modern nation by the rest of the world, and staunch critics of the regime in power are left free to post their alternative viewpoints online. Kazakhstan may well choose a middle ground, censoring the most inflammatory materials but stopping short of the measures taken by China or Uzbekistan.

⁵¹ “Press freedom under threat in run-up to presidential elections,” Reporters Without Borders, 10/24/06.

⁵² “В Мажилисе Парламента РК обсуждается законопроект «Об информатизации»,” MediaProvinces.kz, 9/27/06 (in Russian).

⁵³ Юлия Марченко, “Статья виртуальная – статья уголовная...,” MEDIA-Новости, 11/27/06 (in Russian).

Kyrgyzstan

Although there is no evidence that Kyrgyzstan engages in sustained and systematic internet censorship, several specific instances highlight the fact government's lack of a clear stance or policy on citizen journalism. The most infamous – and mysterious – bout of censorship took place during the months before the Tulip Revolution in March, 2005. Rather than any coordinated censorship measures, opposition websites sustained unexplained technical failures and deliberate hacking.⁵⁴ Opposition sites such as Elcat and AsiaInfo were flooded with spam, other political websites were rendered inaccessible, and at least one domain address was officially de-registered as a consequence of having no official legal status under Kyrgyzstani law.

These surreptitious attacks were not, however, limited to disabling certain websites. The hackers actively sought to co-opt the same technologies used by the opposition groups to undermine them. For instance, thousands of emails were sent out from falsified email accounts purporting to be from domains such as Gazeta.kg and CentrAsia.ru, but filled with propaganda designed solely to discredit those same organizations.⁵⁵

Whether or not the government was directly involved with this chicanery remains unclear. A group called the “Shadow Team” claimed responsibility for the hacking attacks, and threatened to continue its debilitating assault if websites such as Elcat, AsiaInfo, and CentrAsia.ru did not stop publishing all information related to the protest and unrest in Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁶ In perhaps the most brazen effort, the website of the youth group KelKel (meaning “resistance” in Kyrgyz) was de-registered, and a pro-government imposter website was put up in its place.⁵⁷ Instead of advocating youth political mobilization, the imposter site told young people to have fun and forget about politics.⁵⁸

Later analysis by the OpenNet Initiative revealed that the “Shadow Team” were a group of professional, contract hackers based in Ukraine (where their computers were registered), though they conducted the attacks from the United States.⁵⁹ The Kyrgyzstani government did not engage in any direct filtering and there is no damning evidence that it contracted these assaults. Nevertheless, the Kyrgyzstani opposition quickly accused the government of censorship, although some have pointed out that the opposition gained a great deal of sympathy in the international press because of the attacks. Whoever was actually responsible, the widespread perception in-country was that the government was responsible. In March 2005 the Kyrgyzstani opposition removed the presiding government from power through a series of mass protests.

Similar attacks on websites were recorded during the recent protests over constitutional reform. Denial of service attacks rendered AKIPress and 24.kg inaccessible outside of the country. To get around these hacking assaults, AKIPress began cross-publishing its materials on a LiveJournal blog. In essence, traditional mainstream media benefited from tools normally used by citizen journalists to bypass

⁵⁴ “Special Report: Kyrgyzstan” OpenNet Initiative, 2/2005, 1.

⁵⁵ Claire Wilkenson, “Kyrgyzstan: E-Revolution,” Eurasianet, 7/21/05, 2.

⁵⁶ “Special Report: Kyrgyzstan” OpenNet Initiative, 2/2005, 3.

⁵⁷ Wilkenson, 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁹ “Special Report: Kyrgyzstan,” 5.

those who would censor them. As during the 2005 revolution, these attacks originated from outside the country, and are widely believed to be perpetrated by Kyrgyzstan's security service, though evidence is inconclusive.⁶⁰

Tajikistan

Because there is so little internet activity in Tajikistan, there is not much government intervention to speak of. However, during the run-up to Tajikistan's presidential election this past October, five Russian language websites were blocked because they were "harmful to state security."⁶¹ The meager Tajikistani opposition, as well as the international community, immediately cried foul, and only two days later the blocks were lifted.⁶²

While this incident represents the Tajikistani's government first foray into internet censorship, the situation is also very reminiscent of the standoff in India only several months earlier. Like India, when faced with domestic and international uproar, the government ultimately backed down. Perhaps this is indicative of the direction Tajikistani policy will take when the internet becomes more prevalent, but it is still far too early to tell.

Turkmenistan

Reports indicate that Turkmenistan does not employ any sophisticated internet censorship strategy. Unfortunately this is because the government prevents online citizen journalism by almost completely blocking access to the internet. While the rest of Central Asian governments seem torn between the desire for the benefits of technology and fear of the activity it empowers, Turkmenistan has no such qualms. There are no cyber cafes, and a filtered version of the internet is only accessible from a few hotels and international organizations; the connection is reportedly sporadic even there.⁶³

Uzbekistan

Of all the Central Asian governments, Uzbekistan's employs a systematic internet censorship regime that is by far the most sophisticated and expansive in the region.⁶⁴ There is already little doubt which model Uzbekistan has chosen, and the Uzbekistani government may even be receiving technical support directly from China.⁶⁵ Like China,

⁶⁰ "Kyrgyzstan cut off from Internet by hacker attack," OSP International, 11/16/06.

⁶¹ "Tajiks Block Five Russian-Language Websites," RFE/RL, 10/9/06. The websites blocked were: centrasia.ru, ferghana.ru, tajikistantimes.ru, charogiruz.ru, and arianastorm.com.

⁶² "Tajikistan: After Outcry, Authorities Unblock Websites," RFE/RL, 10/11/06.

⁶³ "2006 Annual Report: Internet," Reporters Without Borders.

⁶⁴ Much of the information on citizen journalism and the internet in Uzbekistan comes from personal correspondence with analysts currently conducting research on this topic within the country (December, 2006). Because specific reference could still compromise their still uncompleted research, a reference cannot yet be provided. However, the information presented here as well as a more technical account of the censorship regime in place there will be available later this year.

⁶⁵ So far the evidence for this is only circumstantial, though the techniques employed by the two countries are remarkably similar.

Uzbekistan filters internet content at several different levels. Internet service providers (ISPs) filter out content, and there is a great deal of filtering on the periphery as well. Individual internet cafes are required to implement their own filters as well, and monitor the content their customers are viewing.

In fact, Uzbekistan is the only country in the region where there is evidence of live monitoring.⁶⁶ When customers attempt to access blacklisted sites, there have been reported instances of the café owner immediately phoning the Uzbek security service (SNB). A security officer arrives shortly to interrogate the transgressing customer.

Uzbekistan's blacklist is disproportionately composed of Russian and Uzbek-language sites. This is a pattern common to many authoritarian regimes. China and Iran, for example, target local language sites as well, while leaving a much greater number of foreign language sites freely accessible. The reason for this trend is simple: autocratic governments care more about what their citizens are reading than what they are writing. An added benefit of this strategy is that it minimizes criticism from pesky Western governments and NGOs. Indeed, some Central Asian citizen journalists write in English because they are less likely to raise the ire of the authorities.⁶⁷ Illustrating this trend, the blog network neweurasia.net launched blogs in Russian and Uzbek this past July. While the site published similar content in English for nearly a year, the site was blocked in Uzbekistan only weeks after launching the local language sites.⁶⁸

As in Kazakhstan, rumors of online harassment by Uzbekistani government officials abound. In the case of Uzbekistan, however, there is some circumstantial evidence corroborating these stories. For instance, after the neweurasia.net was blocked in Uzbekistan, unknown individuals using ISPs from within the country still managed to leave strange comments on the supposedly blocked website. Harassment of this nature has been noted on several other blog websites as well, although it cannot be said for certain that the perpetrators were government officials, and it can definitely not be proven that they were acting systematically.

Despite the authoritarian picture painted by most reports and data on internet censorship in Uzbekistan, there is some space for political discourse, especially when endorsed by the state. For instance, on August 12th Uzbekistan participates in an annual international youth day set up by the United Nations. This year the government set up a website dedicated to the event, complete with online forums.^{69 70} In these relatively lively forums, young people are given some degree of free space to discuss real issues, such as the drug problem, HIV/AIDS, and the education system; some youth even seem to criticize the government and propose reforms to the current system. Some level of modest criticism seems to be tolerated, so long as it is in a space provided, monitored, and administered through the government.

By eliminating any unregulated space for citizen journalism, and ensuring that the debate that does take place is sponsored by the state and takes nationalistic connotations, Uzbekistan seeks to gain many of the benefits offered by the internet without the

⁶⁶ Personal correspondence with anonymous source (December, 2006).

⁶⁷ Personal correspondence.

⁶⁸ "Authorities block Neweurasia blog platform," Reporters Without Borders, 8/27/06.

⁶⁹ Международный День Молодёжи (<http://www.you.doda.uz/>) accessed 12/1/06, in Russian.

⁷⁰ A forum is not unlike a blog, except that forums generally allow a much greater number of contributors, but with less quality control.

dispersion of power. While this strategy has been reasonably successful so far, it is also clear that Uzbekistani citizens are fully adept at using the tools that facilitate citizen journalism, and that a desire to discuss social and political issues very much exists.

Policy Implications

A stated goal of the United States and Europe is to promote democracy and civil society throughout the world. In unregulated form, the internet facilitates citizen journalism, online discourse, and empowers alternate viewpoints, all factors that advance both of these goals. The internet's limiting factor in Central Asia is not desire, ability, or motivation to engage in the online community, but rather technical infrastructure. Given the resources and inclination, government internet filtering and subversion is indeed possible, but most of the Central Asian countries have not yet decided whether and how to approach this phenomenon.

This provides a window of opportunity for the international community. Because Central Asia's population is highly educated; fluent in languages with already highly developed online communities of citizen journalists (Russian and Farsi); and eager for change, the region is uniquely positioned for rapid development of these online communities. As India as well as other countries learned, once these online communities of citizen journalists are established, they quickly gain political clout and are difficult to undermine. Therefore, the international community should assist the countries of Central Asia to expand their online infrastructure and reduce its cost while they are still eager to do so, and before they begin devoting those resources to filtering it.

The international community should be careful, however, not to facilitate development of the online sphere in an overtly political manner. Central Asian governments are already suspicious of Western-funded NGOs in general, and increasingly the online sector in particular, blaming them for the revolutions in Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine. Explicitly tying the internet to democracy will only give Central Asian governments more fuel with which to denounce such ideals as inherently "Western."

Other scholars have argued and this author agrees that the intrinsic nature of the unregulated internet will advance democracy and liberalism on its own; there is no reason to overtly push those agendas. Across the globe, the internet is giving a venue for expression to those who would otherwise be voiceless, and find the barriers to civil discourse far too high. Central Asia, however, remains an exception to this trend, and there is much developed countries can do to reduce costs and improve the region's technical infrastructure. Citizen journalism is already developing rapidly in Central Asia; with better and cheaper internet, perhaps it will grow more rapidly than government censorship techniques.