Internet Authorship: Social and Political Implications Within Kyrgyzstan

Ramesh Srinivasan
University of California, Los Angeles

Adam Fish
PhD student in anthropology at UCLA

This paper presents the results of our corroborated study of grassroots Internet sites and authors in the nation of Kyrgyzstan, exceptional in Central Asia for its deregulated Internet policy. The study presents a set of semistructured interviews with notable grassroots Internet authors and activists, including bloggers, forum participants, and journalists, and analyzes this data via a critical communication and media studies lens to point to significant implications on emergent social, cultural, and political movements in the nation.

Key words: Kyrgyzstan, blogging, community, social networks, Central Asia, Internet, citizen journalism, transnational

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Introduction

Through interviews with selected Kyrgyz policymakers, scholars, and Internet authors, this paper explores implications around deregulated Internet use during a period of political change after independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, particularly since the Tulip Revolution of 2005. Our collected data present a set of opinions about this revolution and its relationship to grassroots Internet usage, and that across this range of opinions, an informed perspective toward this revolution is presented. Kyrgyzstan’s unique position as a primary Central Asian nation that lacks Internet regulation has facilitated the emergence of grassroots Internet blogging and website authorship that directly questions the top-down tradition of patronage politics (McGlinchey and Johnson, 2007) and centralized power of older media (television, newspaper) platforms.

Our investigation into Internet authorship in Kyrgyzstan fills a gap in previous scholarship. Previous research in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia has focused on Internet regulation, local language content online, demographic studies of Internet users, and impact of e-centers in rural areas. This paper complements these texts by focusing...
on the relationship between content creation, identity formation, and political/social movements.

We note that in Kyrgyzstan traditional media such as newspapers, radio, television, or cinema all have high production and distribution costs that tend to exclude production by those not in control of capital-intensive technologies or infrastructures of content creation. Our fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan has led us to conclude that despite access issues, community development and political engagement is augmented via a reflective, tactical, and informed usage of the Internet. This is distinct from top-down model of information production featured by printing presses, radio, and television. The emerging model provides community members with the possibility to be active, engaged creators of content and designers of their information technologies and infrastructures, as has been seen by the increase in privatization amongst ISPs, mobile telephony, web publishing platforms, and more. The effects we describe in this paper speak to the uses and appropriations that the profiled social groups have taken toward exploiting the relatively deregulated Internet, as compared to Kyrgyzstan’s Central Asian neighbors.

Our data reveals the importance of utilizing the Internet to share grassroots political information and perspectives. Yet we also find that while some of our respondents blog about less political activities, they see their work within the larger context of online journalism (Hall, 2001). Thus, this paper looks at authorship and appropriation at its core, spanning an analysis of forum participation, blogging, and grassroots journalism. Many of the authors we interviewed argued that their work was part of a larger project of motivating Kyrgyzstan towards a civil society—a principle of governmentality based on citizen participation and social organization as opposed to the Soviet-style totalitarianism governing Kyrgyzstan before independence. This paper concludes that Internet authorship stimulates (a) the formation of community networks and (b) political activism in this nation.

Theoretical Framing

There is a growing interest within media studies in how ethnographic approaches to media production engage nationalism, civic empowerment, and community development. The study of cultures of media production takes as its subject the people who produce media and studies how the act of production reflects historical and social contexts. Anthropological investigations of media production have traditionally focused on either Western elites (Dornfeld, 1998) or indigenous or diasporic peoples (Ginsburg, 1998; Turner, 1992, Srinivasan, 2006, 2007, Srinivasan and Pyati, 2007). This investigation of Internet authorship in Kyrgyzstan focuses neither on Western elites nor indigenous people in the sense of the term as used in classical anthropology, but at local, early-adopting authors within a post-Soviet period of Internet deregulation. Our study is also an extension of anthropological studies of news production (Cottle, 2000; Pedelty, 1995; Hannerz, 2004), which situate journalism within a tense relationship between systems of capitalism, entertainment,
and independent media reporting. Our study is distinct from previous anthropologies of news production because the “field” of our study is the Internet, where political subjectivities are less constrained by political economies and information distribution less filtered by “gatekeepers” (Cassidy, 2003). The respondents we interview were more free to mobilize community and contribute to a public dialogue on democracy than institutional news services studied by previous scholars (Cottle, 2000; Pedelty, 1995). We present forums, journalistic aggregators, and blogs as three sites that enable this grassroots activity.

Our research identifies a culture of media production by their shared technological competencies and modes of practice (Caldwell, 2008, Srinivasan, 2006, 2007). In emphasizing the historical, political, and cultural context of these Internet authors our work draws from the media practice-based theories of Caldwell (2008) to analyze commercial structuration of film and television production within capitalist contexts. Our work differs from these by focusing less on capitalism and ‘old media’ by considering the Internet’s contribution to democratic mobilization in the former Soviet Union.

Our subjects can reasonably be called “cultural activists” (Ginsburg, 2007: 19, Srinivasan, 2006), who are working outside of capitalistic and hegemonic political systems (Appadurai, 1998). Writing against the tendency to create a “culture” simply out of shared affinities and activities, the power of the ethnographic methods which we used in the field is to provide evidence of the manifold ways in which this culture of new media authorship is constituted in diverse individuals and changes through time. This article provides several categories that describe the social activities of these authors. Ginsburg states that it is important, when viewing politically oriented media production, “to understand human agency in a grounded way, without a priori categorizing cultural practices as either dominant/hegemonic or alternative/resistant” (Kondo, 1997: 122). Our field methodologies are intended to locate “political subjectivities” and articulate how they are “mobilized in ways that enable... work in alliance for social transformation” (Kondo, 1997: 22, as cited in Mahon, 2000: 477). In our fieldwork, we identified a spectrum of Internet authorship that, over time, tends towards political and social activism and the construction of a public sphere.

Scholars state the importance of journalistic production for the sustenance of democracy (Altschull, 1984; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Bruns (2008) describes the qualities of open source journalism as being open to participation, fluidly heterarchical, constantly in process, the property of all the participants. According to Bruns and Jacobs (2006), these qualities, used by citizen journalists, can invigorate democratic activity. The participatory, personalized, communally constituted, modifiable qualities of Internet authorship are noted by these authors. Previous scholars comment on how Internet authorship is linked to social activism such as “democratic self-expression and networking” (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; in Saka, 2008). Other authors explore how Internet authorship is both personalized and journalistic, in the fashion of an informed letter-to-the-editor in newspapers (Wall 2005, Kirk
and Borders 2005 in Saka 2008). By being both individualized and public, Internet authorship is an aperture for discussions on the responsibility of the individual in the public sphere, particularly in reference to digital democracies (Matheson, 2004; in Saka, 2008). MacDougall (2005; in Saka) explains when he says, weblogs blur the “distinction between what is public and what is private, between the individual and the group. . . and particularly when devoted to political news, blogs open up the potential for a diverse set of perspectives that can broaden the public’s knowledge base and essentially flatten the hierarchical feel of traditional, mainstream news outlets.”

Introduction to Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan, which shares borders with Kazakhstan to the north, Uzbekistan to the west, Tajikistan to the southwest and China to the southeast, was part of the Soviet Union until 1991. Bishkek is its capital and largest city, with approximately 900,000 inhabitants.

On March 24, 2005, massive protests transformed the political leadership. This has been referred to as the Tulip Revolution. Protesters revolted for the rights to civil liberties—including greater freedom of media and the press. According to our respondents, the Tulip Revolution was the first revolution amongst post-Soviet nations where the Internet was considered a factor in disseminating information and mobilizing political protest.

Internet and Communications in Kyrgyzstan

Internet usage in Kyrgyzstan has been estimated to include 30% of the national population, and is highly skewed toward the cities, particularly Bishkek (Best et al, 2007). There are approximately 150 public Internet access centers around the country. Cybercafés are the primary portal to the Internet for 51% of Internet users in Kyrgyzstan. (itday.com.kg). Nearly 25% of Kyrgyz Internet users access the Internet at work and another 24% view webpages at educational institutions. Use differs by gender (with slightly more women accessing the Internet than men) and by age (80% under 35 years). Of the sites viewed, the vast majority are Russian-language sites (90%). Kyrgyz-created sites comprise only 8% and 2% are English language sites (OpenNet Initiative 2006: 1-4). This demographic information corroborates the recommendations of our institutional contacts (described in 3.1) to focus on Internet authors in Bishkek and under the age of 35.

Media Studies of Kyrgyzstan

In this section, we point to key studies around the social impact of information technologies and Internet access within Central Asia.

Previous regionally focused research includes online language and Internet diffusion (Wei, 2004; Wei & Kolko, 2005a), information systems and pedagogy (Gygi, Wei, and Kolko, 2005), and Internet use in neighboring Uzbekistan (Wei, 2004), which faces different historical patterns and a more authoritarian
government than Kyrgyzstan. Other studies focus on mobile phones and political engagement (Wei & Kolko, 2005b), Internet service providers and Internet access (Johnson & McGlinchey, 2005), regulation policy (McGlinchey and Johnson, 2007), and Internet adoption across Central Asia (Marova, 2004). Few of these studies directly link technology use or authorship to community development or political activism.

The mobile phone study (Wei & Kolko, 2005b) speculates on possibilities for authorship and impact relative to increased technological access. The researchers conclude that mobile phones are seen as status symbols, particularly for youth, and that cultural norms influence the usage of the phones. However, little was found that tied the uses of these phones to community or political issues. The studies of Internet and language (Wei, 2004; Wei & Kolko, 2005a) speculate as to whether the introduction of the Internet translates into local Uzbek educational, economic, and social goals. The authors claim that the fact that the Internet is dominated by foreign, non-Uzbek content, means that it fails to foster a shared sense or image of ‘nation’ amongst its many citizens. We refer to this concept as the national imaginary, building on Benedict Anderson’s important historical analyses of nation-building in postcolonial Asia (Anderson 1989). In contrast to these language studies, however, this paper’s research suggests that locally authored and consumed content in Kyrgyzstan has a contrasting effect of building and mobilizing local communities and instigating dialogues and debates around the present and future of Kyrgyzstan. This activity speaks to the tactical and reflective appropriation of Internet technologies by the authors and analysts with whom we spoke.

**Deregulated Internet Use in Kyrgyzstan**

This section explains how Internet deregulation in Kyrgyzstan has enabled new political discourses to be authored and shared amongst citizens. McGlinchey and Johnson (2007) explain that despite a history of Central Asian patronage politics and top-down, censored “old” media (newspapers, television regulatory frameworks), the Internet has been an area where repressive regimes have made concessions to international donors and local NGOs for a more permissive regulatory framework. Most notably, in Kyrgyzstan, the authors argue that discourses formed and shared via the Internet have contributed to the organization of protests and the emergence of a civil society.

Where international NGOs and bilateral and multilateral donors provide capital and assistance in drafting legislation, such as in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and to a lesser extent Uzbekistan, the formal regulatory framework is more open, clearly articulated, and permissive of electronic media. . . . ICT development demands ongoing negotiations with and aid from willing foreign partners. And it is the iterative nature of this relationship that provides Western donors the ability to ensure conditionality—that is substantive reform—in return for ICT aid (McGlinchey and Johnson, 2007, p.275)
The social associations with the Kyrgyz Internet are thus notable to study. McGlinchey and Johnson’s work, as introduced, shed light on the unique position the Kyrgyz are in relative to their Central Asian neighbors. Each neighbor is associated with significant censorship and top-down regulation and/or a less developed infrastructure for access.

Kazakhstan’s relative wealth, associated with a highly developed oil industry and strong ties with the Russia, has allowed the government to remain largely wealthy while still refusing concessions to foreign civil society organizations and donors. Uzbekistan, in contrast, a much poorer country with far less oil, faces an upsurge of civil resistance, labeled as neo-Islamist by the Karimov government. In its crackdown on these movements, the government has also censored and regulated Internet access.

Thus, Kyrgyzstan’s policies toward deregulation coupled with significant foreign investment and privatization in terms of ISP access and provision, presents the context that motivate the phenomenon we investigate in this study: An Internet that is widely accessible and primarily uncensored contributes to the grassroots authorship and related mobilization.

However, we note that neither a simple policy of deregulation nor an accessible infrastructure are sufficient to produce the new types of discourses that are described throughout this paper (around political mobilization, community development, and more). It is instead the social appropriation of the technology that enables the dynamics we observe. The authors we spoke with have helped us understand that these discourses have emerged through the continuous Internet use, and an ongoing dialogue (with other authors, observers, and commenters) occurring via these grassroots sites. We note that the growth in authorship has presented viewers and authors with a wide range of images, stories, and opinions toward given political and social topics. The interplay between different sites, and the low barrier to access, comment, or become an author has generated a dialogue that is self-referential and ever-changing. Authors have explained that they have been seen as ‘ordinary citizens’ with a larger number of stories, reflections, and opinions to contribute around topics of collective importance, relative to older, top-down, censored media. Our respondents unanimously agree that this range of topics, opinions, and growth in egalitarian authorship generates focused, deeper, and more involved discussions around issues such as political participation, relationship toward Islam and the West, youth culture, and more that are described in the interview data to follow.

As introduced earlier, the Kyrgyz government considers a vibrantly accessible and usable Internet as a symbol of modernity and status while also granting deregulation as a concession to foreign civil society funders, such as the Open Society Institute (OSI). This exists despite the reality that often the Internet can be used to foster social and activist movements that threaten the very existence of authoritarian systems of rule (Cleaver, 1998; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Srinivasan, 2006; Lievrouw, 2006; Kahn and Kellner, 2004).

Although the downstream liberalizing effects of these more open ICT environments is by no means certain, recent uprisings in Central Asia suggest
that an open ICT environment does assist in the building of national and transnational activist networks and does encourage social mobilization . . . (however) social mobilization and even the overthrow of one authoritarian regime does not preclude the rise of new forms of illiberal rule. (McGlinchey and Johnson, 2007, 285).

In Kyrgyzstan, the access to networking equipment and foreign aid transformed the Internet into a liberalizing technology (Perraton, 2004; Mikosz, 2004). Private ISPs and private and public organizations have emerged to challenge traditional media hegemony. Some of these organizations directly receive aid from foreign sources, such as the Soros-related InterNews agency, and others such as the Aki Press news agency, work actively with grassroots bloggers, forums, and international news feeds to present real-time information to their viewers. Such sites are also being accessed globally and locally. Aki Press, for example, is viewed 120,000 times/day and 2 million times/month, 70% of which originate from ISPs within Kyrgyzstan. Diesel.kg, a leading citizen-authored web forum has an even higher rate of access from within Kyrgyzstan. Our intention in this study is to further investigate the rise of Internet authorship in a deregulated Kyrgyzstan by speaking directly to recommended authors who exploit the Internet and its deregulated frameworks to articulate new discourses around their nation and community.

Methodology and Typology of Internet Authorship

The methods we used in the field were threefold: a) analysis of content (“observant participation”), b) interviews, and c) participant observation of respondent use of the Internet use. Brauchler (2005) delineates two ways of conducting research online: distanced and involved. The distanced model argues that because Internet content is not dependent on specific places for consumption, and is instead mobile and can be accessed in multiple locations, ethnographic research can be conducted without meeting the research subjects (Hine, 2000). In fact, because the indigenous environment of the Internet author is in the virtual such engagements with the real people might bias the research. We follow the involved model, building on Brauchler’s (2005) arguments that direct, in-person participant observation is necessary in research into Internet production cultures. Like other researchers who combined distanced and involved participant observations (Baym, 1995, Srinivasan and Pyati, 2007; Kendall, 1999: 71, as quoted in Brauchler, 2005), we traveled to Kyrgyzstan, met with Internet authors and gathered data utilizing the three methods described at the beginning of this paragraph.

Our fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan occurred during the summer of 2007 and via e-mail contact before and after. The first stage of our research included detailed analyses of scholarly and international policy writings on media and politics (cited previously) within the country. From these, we identified three key institutions to contact in Bishkek that were engaged in monitoring and analyzing Internet use and social
movements within Kyrgyzstan: These were the Soros Foundation, Global Internet Policy Initiative (GIPI), and the National Democratic Institute. Our contacts at these organizations pointed us to 20 key Internet authors and respondents considered most widely read and influential within the nation. During the interviews, respondents often referred to one another as relevant for us to contact, suggesting that the recommended pool of respondents was appropriate. We asked these authors and respondents whether other notable individuals were present that could add to this study, and were reassured that the pool whose experiences we present are a comprehensive sample of the dynamics on which this paper is centered.

Our respondents include seven Internet authors [Names: One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six], a grassroots journalist [Name: Seven], and five information policy scholars, forum participants, and analysts based in Bishkek [Names: Eight, Nine, Ten, Eleven, Twelve]. The seven authors include two leading grassroots politicians, two individuals involved in cultural heritage organizations, one individual working within a nongovernmental organization dedicated to national education and social welfare, and two bloggers, referred to us by every other informant, involved in political and social organizations and institutions within the nation. The grassroots journalist informant has been actively involved in aggregator design, political and social criticism and reflection, and has served as the deputy editor for the leading news site, the Aki Press, among others. Finally, our information policy analysts, include a doctoral student specializing in Kyrgyz media policy, and four directors of leading organizations dedicated to the analysis of civil society, political participation, education. These individuals were referred to us because of their knowledge of the Tulip Revolution, older Soviet media policy, and significant historical understanding of both domestic and transnational issues affecting Kyrgyz society.

For the protection of our respondents, many of whom have authored politically critical content under pseudonyms, we have only provided their identity as numbered above. We conducted semistructured interviews with these respondents, asking all of the following questions:

1) What do you hope to accomplish with your Internet authorship?
2) Describe the impacts of Internet authorship in the nation with anecdotes/examples.
3) Is your audience Kyrgyz or non-Kyrgyz citizens? Describe in detail.
4) How do you interpret the relationship between this authorship and social/community/political changes in Kyrgyzstan?
5) What relationship do you see between Internet authorship and tv/newspapers, and other older media?
6) How does local vs. international vs. Russian television, film, and Internet influence your activity?
7) When you are blogging do you identify with Kyrgyz nationalism or some other transnational community?
8) What is the relationship between your authorship and other sites and authors?
9) Does your blogging make you want to participate in other digital media?
10) Describe the offline vs. online relationship between authors? Give examples.

The results of this data, presented above with analyses, were summarized using grounded theory, a methodology that treats all collected interview as of equal importance and attempts to discern patterns across the data. These patterns, as explained by Strauss and Corbin (1994), are detected through the common occurrences of responses, and are therefore highlighted with examples below.

The data reveals that respondents find that Kyrgyz Internet authorship could be categorized around (a) blogging, (b) forums, and (c) journalistic websites/aggregators. We present notable examples of each of these, and elaborate upon (b) and (c), as blogs are already well known to global audiences.

**Forums in Kyrgyzstan:** Forums are websites where individuals can post information and others can comment and engage the post. Our respondents affirmed the power of forums to disseminate information and mobilize people. All of our respondents who create blogs and others grassroots websites also use forums to discover new information and engage people in digital dialogue. Information is often shared between forums and blogs. Diesel, Kyrgyzstan’s largest forum, is user-created and complements journalism sites, such as Aki Press, by sharing news information.

**Citizen Journalistic Websites in Kyrgyzstan:** The third type of web authorship platform described by respondents were citizen journalistic websites. These sites are of two types: (i) sites that aggregate information and news from diverse sources, and (ii) the more traditional static webpage maintained by an NGO. The primary distinction between these two types of sites are levels of viewer interactivity possible. Aggregators usually facilitate interactivity by providing readers the opportunity to link news stories to the aggregator site and leave comments on stories linked to
by other viewers. The more traditional websites do not provide opportunities for interactivity and can only be changed by the web hosts.

Citizen journalism sites borrow from blogs and other grassroots websites. The relationship is largely complementary however since neither blogs nor individual websites maintain a journalistic focus. Journalistic endeavors are often tethered to the need for validating a statement, more so than blogs or forums. Examples of aggregator sites we explored include: Akipress, 24.kg, Fergana.ru, pr.kg, kloop.kg, and eurasia.org. Static websites associated with NGOs include Freedom House, the U.S. State Department, Global Internet Policy Initiative and Soros.

Gatekeeping, that is, the subjective filtering and selective exhibition of information occurs in several of the contexts we explore. Our subjects working in static citizen journalistic sites function to prioritize particular debates and discourse. Our informants, thus, are key stakeholders in the discourses that are prominent online. But as gatekeepers, who, in addition, also represent the educated, civically minded, digitally literate population of Kyrgyzstan, their role as gatekeepers and architects of online discourse about democracy in Kyrgyzstan should be problematized.

Data Presentation and Analysis

As discussed in section 1, the collected data confirms relevant interactions between Internet authorship and (a) the mobilization and sustenance of community, and (b) networked political activism. This data is discerned using a grounded theory method of analysis of the semistructured interviews, as detailed above. The data reveals a concern amongst respondents around the government views its policies towards deregulation. The political environment is thus one wherein the discourses...
enabled by grassroots are endangered if and/or when the government shifts its policy and practices of allowing deregulation. The closing sections of this paper point out that the government has begun to take actions in this vein, though not yet to the stage where the authors we spoke with have been silenced.

Across the data, we find a clear growth from personal to politically oriented authorship. Our respondents describe their use of personal stories as mechanisms to present themselves to one another and their distributed audiences. The data confirms that as they develop experience with the practice of authorship, the respondents locate their social and political reflections within these narratives.

Stories, even around personal or individual topics, evolve as authors become more experienced, yet shift to more explicitly focus around issues with which the authors wish to develop a dynamic and shared dialogue. Marlow has described this phenomenon as “an innovation in personal publishing (that has) come to engender a new form of social interaction on the web; a massively distributed but completely connected conversation covering every imaginable topic of interest” (Marlow, 2004). Indeed, scholars observe that blogs effectively reconcile the political and social, impacting larger communities through personal stories that can travel and be shared, debated, and catalyze information sharing and dialogue (Bruns and Jacobs, 2006). The data reveals a seamless movement from the personal to the social, cultural, and political level very much at work in Kyrgyzstan, elaborated upon in sections 4.1 and 4.2 below.

Community and Identity
Our interview data indicates that Internet authorship has been an important vehicle for the construction and assertion of identity amongst the mentioned authors.
This was confirmed by the interview data wherein every individual affirmed the role of grassroots organization in catalyzing the “voices” of youth. For example, a policy informant, Twelve, and a blogger, Nine, indicate that in their research and practice, Internet authorship is integral to youth expression in urban Kyrgyzstan. Every interviewed author in our study was under the age of 30, and one informant, Ten, who authors Kyrgyzstan’s third most popular blog, is 17 years old. A variety of seminal studies have confirmed that authorship can hold a significant impact on social engagement (Pinkett, 2003; Papert, 1997), and the development of emotional identities that would otherwise be restricted by traditional institutions of the nation (Turkle, 1995). Our interview data indicates that by serving as shared information spaces, Kyrgyz blogs are not only meaningful in terms of the construction of the blogger’s own identity but also for those who comment, read, and add to the blog. The blogger is therefore empowered to decide upon content to be shared, viewed, and observed, but others who interact with the blog are also empowered to serve as authors in their own right.

However, most notably within this process of identity formation is the power of community created around local authorship and information sharing. The personal validation created by authorship and commenting is complemented by the sense that both forum participants, bloggers, and other authors have of being part of a community. Our respondents unanimously agreed that the “blogosphere” in Kyrgyzstan was a type of community network (Hampton, 2002, 2006; Gurstein, 2000a/b; Kling, 2000; Srinivasan, 2007; Williams and Alkalimat, 2004), one where bloggers participate on one another’s sites, yet also meet physically at cafes, restaurants, etc. Several bloggers claimed, moreover, that their community is one characterized by “collective action” (Schuler, 2004), where bloggers together mobilize to enable free access to information, particularly in cases of government restriction or political turmoil (e.g.; The Tulip Revolution, 2005).

The power of community cannot be understated. Communities that are involved in authoring, sharing, and reflecting on each other’s viewpoints tend to be more strongly tied and closely knit, maintaining stronger social capital (Putnam 2000). Our respondents (Four, Six, Seven, Eight, Eleven, Twelve) pointed to the dearth of civil discourse and the clan-like style of social interaction (Collins 2004) prior to the introduction of grassroots Internet sites, claiming that these have been revitalized as Internet authorship has emerged. As an illustration, informant Six’s blog points to the interesting example of the Tengiz Riots, a political event that he explained stimulated great personal and emotive feedback. One week after these riots occurred, he posted an editorial story, including the following statement:

It is significant, however, that the event occurred between Kazakhs and Turks and that it is not the first such violence to erupt between the two groups in recent memory. The presence of such violence directed against Turks in Kazakhstan demonstrates the degree to which Turkey has fallen from grace in the region since the early 1990s.
Such a statement stirred a great deal of emotion, Six explained. For example the user “anonymous” posted the following reaction:

Why are you lying? I am a Kazakh, me and my friends neither of us have any negative feelings against any of those people, may be a little bit about some Turks who act like savages. I understood one thing from what you say –you hate Kazakhstan.

This example is but one demonstration of a point of consensus amongst respondents. The sharing of local views around the nation has effectively created possibilities for communities to be established from grassroots rather than institutional structures. We see this analysis of Kyrgyz blogs fitting in strongly with Jürgen Habermas’s framework of “communicative action” (1987), an analysis that considers a thriving public sphere or community as one in which language serves as a medium of common understanding, where claims of rationality can be raised, disputed, invalidated, and revalidated.

In this text, Habermas argues that rationality can be enabled via the communicative act rather than a property ascribed to an individual in totality. Therefore, rationality is constructed through dialogue, debate, and the release of information that diverges from pre-existing structures of control and power. Habermas therefore argues that action is enabled via the mutually shared activity of rational dialogue, which has the property to be self-reflexive and aware of the limitations and influences that may attempt to filter its attempt to create new identities.

Our findings regarding echo previous researchers’ claims that the Internet often reifies national identity (Miller & Slater, 2000). As Ericksen recently stated, “the Internet is fast becoming a major medium for the consolidation, strengthening and definition of collective identities, especially in the absence of a firm territorial and institutional base” (Ericksen, 2006: 5). Our informants became Internet authors during a period of nationalistic transformation and revolution. The absence of a “firm” majoritarian national political identity coupled with a deregulated Internet likely contributed to the flourishing of Internet authorship during the period of investigation. With such changes occurring nationally and access to international information increasing via the Internet questions of national and personal identity appeared prevalent.

Connecting the Habermasian model to the Central Asian deregulated Internet environment informs our argument that decentralized authorship enables the creating and dialogue of views in a manner that escapes the overpowering control of the Soviet “old media” environment. The ability for information to pollinate and inspire reactions and structure communities and social movements all are key acts of communication and rationality that present new political possibilities, the subject of this paper’s second major finding.
Politics, Citizen Journalism, and Activism

Bruns is hopeful that this rise of citizen journalism signifies the presence of a new form of folk or vernacular culture arising at the interface of open source technologies and discourse on society (2008: 399). What is distinct about our example from Kyrgyzstan, in contrast to the burgeoning literature on transnational community solidarity facilitated by new media (Ginsburg, 2007; Mahon, 2000; Srinivasan and Pyati, 2007), is that place and local community are not eclipsed by the global but Internet authorship reaffirms commitments to place and nation.

Our respondents argued that they viewed their practice of authorship as part of a larger project of motivating Kyrgyzstan towards a civil society—a principle of governmentality based on participation and social organization as opposed to the Soviet-style totalitarianism governing Kyrgyzstan before independence. More generally, the respondents (Two, Four, Five, Seven, Twelve) we met argued that Internet authorship motivated new forms of networked political activism that were stifled via regulation of older media platforms. For example, Four notes that the election monitoring organization he organized had the same number of networked computers in 2000 as they had in 2005. The difference was the presence of citizen journalists with cell phones and digital still and video cameras. With these tools—despite limited serving capacities—they were able to almost immediately disseminate information via the Internet.

Moreover, Two explained that over 90% of the demonstrators during the Tulip Revolution came from rural areas. They were not encouraged to come to Bishkek to demonstrate directly because of Internet posts, which is spotty at best in the rural geographies. Rather, Internet authorship and information sharing converged with tactical uses of cell phones, which were directly used to mobilize rural citizens. Other respondents (Two, Twelve) also argue that speed and efficiency motivate their Internet authorship. These characteristics are essential to online aggregators and forums where Bishkek civil activists and international journalists covering the demonstrations in 2005 and 2007 could upload information for immediate consumption. Four noted that in some instances, international journalists would be given the cell phone numbers of citizen journalists on the site of the demonstrations for immediate reporting. Other respondents (Four and Seven) explain that Kyrgyz politicians, U.S. embassy officials, and citizens actually switched their attention from state run newspaper and television to grassroots Internet sites. For example, Four states that the “cyberjournalism that took place in Kyrgyzstan in March events is still considered the moment in the Russian language blogosphere when cyberjournalism popped up as a phenomenon (throughout the entire former Soviet Union).” He continued: “That was the time when—not only people in Kyrgyzstan—in Moscow, Israel, Russia, Ukraine, everybody turned to a few bloggers or one blogger in Bishkek.” “Her blog made blogging popular—not just in Kyrgyzstan but across Russian speaking universe.” This individual, informant Five, had her blog evolve into a repository and exhibition platform for the most up-to-date digital photographs and news updates for the Kyrgyzstan and the world.
Our respondents (Four, Eight, Nine, and Twelve) also pointed out that blogging grew from limited usage during the 2005 Tulip Revolution to a dominant mode of networked activism during the 2006 protests against organized crime. Information was aggregated by citizen journalists into e-mails that were sent to news aggregators who posted their reports on their web site. A year later, during the April rallies against organized crime were mobilized via “online activism” (Four, Nine). Participants in the diesel.kg online community forum, for example, mobilized to march against organized crime, actually bringing signs clearly stating “Diesel,” referring to the online forum.

Our institutional contacts and interviewees also pointed to the power of blogs in forming political capital within Bishkek. This, they claimed, is the case in Kyrgyzstan despite the relatively low levels by which the sites may be accessed. Four argued that for politicians, with the rapid spread of misinformation and libel, the blog allows one to control his or her online identity. Eight added to this by explaining that with emerging democracies, it is critical for younger and lesser-known politicians to avoid the fall into marginality that often accompanies an initial quest for candidacy or influence. Four expressed that as an individual with political aspirations, his blog enables him to present his opinions, argue with his detractors, and concede his position if necessary. The Internet, in this instance, is helping Four achieve a degree of political transparency impossible within an older media environment.

An aspect of this political activism is complemented by the growth in blogging amongst the respondents for intended transnational audiences. Several of our respondents were active Internet authors during the Tulip Revolution. One example of this is Three, a civil society activist, who originally began his blog in 2007 as a “platform for communication” with friends from Japan and Russia. Next he used it to voice his “opinion about civil society” and discuss the failed political demonstrations in Bishkek from March 2007. His blog was used to voice his “opinion on [political] opposition, demonstration, and governance.” Three’s initial foray into blogging was to increase transnational communication and increasingly became political.

Moreover, an aspect of the activist goals of bloggers is to tell stories from personal perspectives, as indicated earlier. Two posits that 90% of blogs are about personal lives, though often evolving to focus stories around social, cultural, or political issues, as previously discussed. The most popular blogs, he argues, however, are political in nature. He sees the blogosphere as a “civic square” for “citizen journalism” where political arguments can circulate. Two writes in English to enable him to communicate with the non-Russian world. Two began blogging on Myspace but was quickly turned away because of the absence of a Kyrgyz audience. Like Three, Two first started writing about his personal life before his blog became political. When Two writes in Russian he believes 50% of his readers are Kyrgyz, 40% Russian or Kazak. He writes for friends in Uzbekistan and Georgia, and receives comments from readers in Iran. He cited the U.S. Democratic Presidential YouTube Primary debates (held on 7/23/07) as an example of how Internet participation contributes to civil
engagement in the United States, and is optimistic that such a model may emerge in Kyrgyzstan.

Like Three, Four’s blogging took a similar trajectory, he began as a “passive blogger”—sharing and commenting upon internationally authored content. Four uses his blog for political as well as personal goals for a national and transnational audience. It allows him to explain his political motives and gives readers a chance to react and understand his perspective. He has been told by the Kyrgyz Head of Presidential Administration that politicians throughout Central Asia and Russia read his blog regularly. He also notes that a recent entry on his blog has potentially provoked the State to disqualify him from an upcoming election.

Two also notes that the participatory element of the blogging audience is essential, “it is important for me to know what other people think [about my opinions on politics].” For political activists in Kyrgyzstan, a blog is a way to achieve a fluidity between personal opinion and political observation. In this way, the blog helps politically minded citizens like Four to achieve local public transparency while informing any international journalists about politics in Kyrgyzstan.

Twelve noted that access to international information may defuse xenophobia that empowers the growth in Islamic fundamentalism and dictatorship. In his role of the director of Bishkek’s Soros Foundation, Twelve argued that stimulating grassroots Internet usage is key to Kyrgyzstan’s democratic process.

Conclusions and Questions for Future Research

Our data is clear: Internet technologies can enable the construction and dissemination of alternative political discourses within the deregulated policy environment of Kyrgyzstan. Yet, when and if the government decides to push back with the policy and practice of intensive surveillance and policing, the dynamics we observe could be easily tempered, if not altogether stifled. Without this, however, Internet communication technologies make possible new forms of grassroots political engagement that start with citizens, their decentralized and distributed networks, and their uses of blogs, journalistic sites, and other news aggregators. The implications of this appropriation include empowering and mobilizing new forms of community, and enabling new forms of political activism amongst citizens who authors discourses around the national imaginary that are not directly tied to controlled institutional regulation. Kyrgyz internet authors are impacting local populations while concurrently reaching domestic and transnational audiences, potentially pointing to greater diffusion of grassroots authored information. The communicative actions enabled within this grassroots environment speak to possibilities to overcome an older media environment featuring censorship and centralized control. We believe some of these include:

– Are there quantitative models that can capture overall impact of these new practices of grassroots authorship? Quantitatively, we know that a small percentage of Kyrgyzstan’s population actually accesses the Internet regularly.
Estimates place approximately 10,000 regular users of the Aki Press and 14,000 users of the Diesel forum. However, one could argue that the relevance of these sites cannot be captured by solely quantitative data, but also by questioning “who” accesses these sites, which is confirmed by the gathered data in this paper. Therefore, this question may ask researchers to consider the networks of users semantically, based on their roles and position within different social networks. Six has pointed out, for example, that because Internet authors rapidly and purposefully link amongst one another, content rapidly diffuses across different sites, and gets picked up by Google, which algorithmically privileges sites that are explicitly linked to one another. Six also points out that significant change-agents such as USAID, UNDP, the World Bank, and Civil Society advocates (NGOs and political aspirants) who are involved with authoring, accessing, and sharing the information from such sites in their programs, through other media platforms, such as newsletters.

- Is grassroots Internet authorship impacting rural populations? Initial studies have shown the potential of Internet outreach to rural Kyrgyzstan (Best et al., 2007), particularly around engaging youth to collaboratively socialize around Internet cafes, as well as to stimulate small Internet cafe businesses throughout the country. However, little work has been conducted directly focusing on the impacts of blogs, citizen journalistic sites, and forums in rural locations.
- Does the continued exposure to diverse viewpoints entrench or expand the viewpoints held by users? It is challenging to research how exposure to Internet sites from transnational geographies containing multiple worldviews changes a person. This would involve identifying the exposure from television, cinema, and printed material of both state and transnational sources. Some of our respondents (Four, Two) listed with a degree of pride that their audience spans other countries. Likewise, these same bloggers note that these interactions with foreign-born readers inspire their wish to travel to foreign countries and their imaginative desire to travel more. We believe it useful to further study how and which types of transnational Internet communities inspire the sharing of diverse viewpoints.
- As blogging and participation in grassroots Internet sites increase, do communities continue to have tight-knit, physical manifestation? Or do they move into the emerging model of Internet-facilitated ‘communities of interest’ (Hampton, 2006; Wellman, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Cummings et al, 2002; Preece, 2000)? Significant studies around social capital have discussed the movement from local, geographically bounded strong communities to communities of interest. Local place has become less relevant in the construction and maintenance of social networks in lieu of mediated communities where an individual can find community in those with similar interests. We are curious as to whether this trend would replicate itself in Kyrgyzstan, particularly as online- communities continue to flourish.
This paper speaks to an emerging dynamic enabled by the democratisation of new media technologies in a very understudied part of the world. Our initial study, focused on leaders of new social movements and their reflections on their practices as grassroots Internet authors opens up a number of integral questions for future scholarship in the region yet also more generally around the impact of authorship toward community mobilization and networked political activism. It also speaks to the possibility to consider the relevance of a classic theoretical and empirical models around media production and communicative action within a young nation in the post-Soviet region. The presented study of this paper points to these dramatic implications by speaking directly to individuals at the forefront of this movement in Kyrgyzstan, and traces the growing impacts their practices hold toward the future of their nation.

References


**About the Authors**

Ramesh Srinivasan is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Information Studies and Design|Media Arts at the University of California Los Angeles. His research interests and doctoral seminars build on his interdisciplinary background as an engineer, designer, social scientist, and ethnographer. Projects and paper focus on issues as the interactions between new media technologies and global cultures and communities; the use of design and social-science perspectives to analyze the impacts of information technology on global education, health, economics, politics, governance, and social movements, and infrastructure knowledge management, web 2.0, semantic web, and information systems, ontologies; information technology and international development; indigenous and local knowledge systems and new media; digital libraries, digital museums, and applied systems around such areas as public health, microfinance, e-governance, distance learning, and knowledge management. Ramesh earned a doctorate in design from Harvard University, a Master of Science in Media Arts and Sciences from MIT Media Laboratory and a Bachelor of Science in Industrial Engineering from Stanford University. His work has been published in
top international refereed venues and via invited lectures at diverse locations such as the World Bank, UNESCO, Government of India, Microsoft Research, and more. **Address:** Department of Information Studies, GSEIS UCLA, GSEIS Building, Office 222, 300 Young Drive North, Los Angeles CA 90095 USA

Adam Fish is a PhD student in anthropology at UCLA and a VC2 producer for the US/UK cable network Current TV. He studies cultures of media production at the confluence of new media and television industries. His documentaries—usually about nationalism, religion, sexuality, and technology—advance the method of an activistic and reflexive ethnographic filmmaking. He has numerous published articles on these topics.