GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION
Focus on freedom of expression and association online

*This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated
to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage
in the face of violence and repression reminded the world
that people working together for change have the power
to claim the rights they are entitled to.*

Global Information Society Watch 2011

Sida

KYRGYZSTAN

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN KYRGYZSTAN DURING ETHNIC TENSIONS IN 2010

Civil Initiative on Internet Policy (CIIP)
Tattu Mambetallieva
www.gipi.kg

Kyrgyzstan has experienced two revolutions over the past ten years – the second as recent as April last year. In both cases the situation was aggravated by a clampdown on the media, as well as on the internet. In March 2005, two of the leading internet service providers (ISPs) were targeted by unknown attackers. A series of emails from hackers sent to the providers insisted that they block two Kyrgyzstani news websites, www.msn.kg and www.respublica.kg. Similar letters were sent to a popular regional news site, www.centralasia.ru, demanding that it stop publishing information about the situation in Kyrgyzstan. Mass denial-of-service (DOS) attacks were also launched on sites in Kyrgyzstan. In order to stop the attacks, the network operator had to turn the internet off completely for a day. It was then that Kyrgyzstan was not accessible to the outside world, at least via the internet. The March 2005 coup soon followed.

A similar situation was repeated in 2010, before the April coup. Access to the sites www.fergana.ru, www.centrasia.ru and Web Radio Liberty and to the popular web forum www.dieselforum.kg was blocked. Media outlets placing information in the internet were persecuted – a sign of the times that led to the sudden change of government.

The internet in times of crisis

Although internet penetration is still comparatively low, the growth of internet users in Kyrgyzstan has not slowed. Various surveys offer different figures for the number of users in the country, but all of them concur that the main category of users is young people and that 70% of users are concentrated in central cities.[1]

The set up of the internet infrastructure in Kyrgyzstan means that access to international websites is expensive, while accessing websites and hosting with a .kg domain inside the country is completely free once you have an account with an ISP. This divide has existed from the beginning of the development of the internet in the country, and civil society activists periodically campaign for the cost of international bandwidth to be reduced. However, it is exactly this kind of division of traffic that has made local social networks the most popular social networking sites when compared to Facebook and Twitter, amongst others.

Even the Russian-language social networks that enjoyed enormous popularity in the early days of their birth, such as Odnoklassniki and Vkontakte, rapidly lost their ratings after the appearance of local Kyrgyz social networks. Twitter does not have a large following in Kyrgyzstan. At least initially, Twitter could not be used via mobile phones in the country, but now there are about 100 registered users. About 25,000 Facebook users were registered, most of them Kyrgyz citizens living outside the country. In contrast, the most popular local social network sites account for more than 250,000 users.

Because the main users of the internet in Kyrgyzstan are the youth, the most popular local social networking sites focus on entertainment. Therefore, civic participation in social networks during the events of the April 2010 coup was not apparent.

However, the situation changed in early June of that year when the ethnic conflict in the south occurred. During this period, many people died and it was impossible to achieve political stability for a long time. It was then that different kinds of online content, including videos, photos and articles – much of it amounting to rumour mongering – appeared on various social networking sites, fanning the flames of ethnic conflict. In response, volunteers began countering the misinformation using Skype.

Using Skype for civic networking

When you look at the different stories dealing with the role of social networks during the revolutions, coups and natural disasters in different countries, the creativity of internet users is striking.

This impact is not always positive. The 2010 events in our country, worsened by social issues that led to ethnic tensions, were fuelled by the spreading of false rumours. These included photographs of dead people that could not be verified, and claims that the drinking water in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, was poisoned, and that there had been various militia attacks on civilians.

---

1   www.gipi.kg/archives/1073

For a long time the interim government could not establish control in the south of the country, making it impossible for it to respond to and refute the rumours.

In order to avoid panic among the population, an urgent mobilisation of volunteers, journalists and grassroots communicators took place in an effort to inform the public about the real situation. It all started spontaneously and randomly. One non-governmental organisation began a Skype conversation with organisations, friends and employees who were in different parts of the capital.

Initially the group acted as a kind of grassroots civic network, with each of the participants recording what he or she saw on the ground, documenting how looters were breaking into shops and setting fire to buildings. This information was promptly reported to a group of people who had volunteered to protect shops and homes from looters. Information was also passed on to the media.

Then the forum started to grow, turning its attention to the other regions of the country, where looting was also happening – and it was able to act as a way of verifying information that was being spread online.

When someone heard rumours, he or she simply logged on to Skype and asked whether anyone could confirm them. This method proved to be incredibly effective, because participants represented a reliable and geographically distributed network. People could add colleagues to a chat group if they happened to be at a location where rumours were spreading, and this would help confirm the real facts on the ground.

The group became very popular. On one night about 2,000 people had joined the chat. Eleven forum chats on Skype were connected by several key users able to organise the conversations and exchange information. The group reached its peak and was no longer able to add new members. Skype chat was full of people sending and receiving information in real time. The forum then moved to a web platform (www.inkg.info) to continue circulating real-time information across the country. The site was called "Checked: not rumours".

Skype chat also played a crucial role in the distribution of humanitarian aid to the south, where a significant number of people were affected by fires and widespread clashes between ethnic groups. Rumours persisted, and included tales about poisoned humanitarian supplies and attacks along the state border. One Skype-chat member called the minister of defence to clarify information about the attacks on the state border – only to find that they were not true.

During the complications that resulted from interethnic friction in the south of the country, social networks included a number of videos and pictures of dead people. However, it was not possible to establish the nationalities or ethnicity of the corpses in the photographs and videos – even while ethnic groups were using the images as calls to action. Because of these images circulated on the internet, ethnic tensions were exacerbated. In response, the Skype group voted online for the removal of the pictures and videos from websites, which resulted in many of them being deleted by administrators of the social networks.

Working with foreign social networks was more complicated, and involved a greater number of internet users outside Kyrgyzstan. Foreign internet users could not fully understand the complexity of the situation. This is why few based outside of the country limited the mass distribution of the different videos, articles and photographs.

As the ethnic conflict became more politicised, this was reflected on the internet. The war of information between the different parties began, with both sides spreading rumours and misinformation. In the south access to the internet was not widespread, which meant that the information needed to be checked via SMS text messages, and with the help of friends. Because of this it took some time to refute the rumours in these areas.

It is still difficult to establish the facts surrounding the role of the internet and the spreading of rumours during the conflict. Different commissions have tried to determine who the perpetrators were and to reconstruct the events. As a result, the commissions, both local and international, have come to different conclusions, which at times contradict each other. But what is clear is that the Skype network demonstrated the effectiveness of using the internet to verify rumours and speculation in times of crises.

Conclusion

During the 2010 coup and subsequent ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan, social networks played an effective role in stabilising the situation in the country. On the other hand, they complicated the process of reconciliation between ethnic groups. The main reason for this is the uneven development of infrastructure. Where the internet was available, there was a high likelihood of obtaining reliable information; but there was an information vacuum where internet access was limited. Television and newspapers failed to keep people properly informed. Because of this, access to the internet should be a primary goal of any state. Despite various attempts to control it, it

should remain decentralised and self-regulating, a situation which is more likely to guarantee the security of citizens.

However, there remain challenges. With the freedom to access and disseminate information comes responsibility. Given the recent past, the new government has refused to control the mass media, and the internet has offered a broad guarantee of freedom to disseminate information. Twenty new print publications were launched, and more than seven new media outlets started on the internet within five months of the new government coming to power.

But, apparently, the media were not ready for this kind of freedom, which has led to the widespread proliferation of false information. Especially in remote regions of the country, news websites began to disseminate information without checking its validity.[2]

Actions steps

The possibility of broadband access has been discussed for the past five years in Kyrgyzstan, but no real steps have been taken. The process is delayed by the fact that operators do not want to develop their networks in the outlying regions, since it does not pay. The government is always trying to increase the costs of operating in the country, introducing new fees and obligations for those that want to offer services in remote regions.

Broadband access should be a priority for our country because it provides a solution to social problems and solves the problem of information security in general. To achieve this it is necessary to reform the regulatory process in telecommunications services, as well as to ensure the independence of the regulator. This would offer stability for businesses, and boost infrastructural development. Social networks should strengthen themselves through self-regulation. This would mean encouraging users to be responsible for the accuracy of the information disseminated on the internet.

It is also necessary to popularise the idea of the internet as a way to access information, including using mobile phones. Training is necessary. After the events of April and June 2010, civil society activists urgently pushed for measures that would allow Twitter to be used in Kyrgyzstan. Once this was achieved, they travelled to all of the regions in the country to conduct training in the use of Twitter. In 2011 the number of Twitter users in the country had increased ten-fold. ∎

---

2 kg.akipress.org/news:405371 and bektour.com/2011/08/10/kak-mozhno-zastavit-akipress-i-kabar-rasskazat-o-sobytii-kotorogo-nikogda-ne-bylo

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

Everyone is familiar with the stories of Egypt and Tunisia. **GISWATCH** authors tell these and other lesser-known stories from more than 60 countries. Stories about:

PRISON CONDITIONS IN ARGENTINA Prisoners are using the internet to protest living conditions and demand respect for their rights.

TORTURE IN INDONESIA The torture of two West Papuan farmers was recorded on a mobile phone and leaked to the internet. The video spread to well-known human rights sites sparking public outrage and a formal investigation by the authorities.

THE TSUNAMI IN JAPAN Citizens used social media to share actionable information during the devastating tsunami, and in the aftermath online discussions contradicted misleading reports coming from state authorities.

GISWATCH also includes thematic reports and an introduction from Frank La Rue, UN special rapporteur.

GISWATCH 2011 is the fifth in a series of yearly reports that critically cover the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GISWATCH is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH
2011 Report
www.GISWatch.org