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INTERNET: BETWEEN CENSORSHIP AND FREE FLOW OF INFORMATION

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FREE INTERNET: A MUST FOR FREE EXPRESSION

Let me briefly give you an account of some of the activities of the OSCE RFOM in the field of media freedom on the Internet:

- Starting from 2003 three Amsterdam Conferences on “Freedom of the Media on the Internet” have been organized. The 2005 Conference was focusing on Central Asia and South Caucasus.
- There have been quite a couple of publications on this topic. The latest, i.e. “The Media Freedom Internet Cookbook”, has also been translated into the Russian language.
- Also, a whole set of Recommendations, Statements and “Recipes” on principles of media freedom on the Internet have been developed. All of them have also been translated. We hope that these principles and best practices serve as guidelines for all OSCE participating States.

All publications and recommendations are available on our website.

Let me mention one of the most recent RFOM activities, which is a follow up from the HDIM in Warsaw in September 2005: There we were informed on a paper called “Regulations for the Allocation of Domain Space in the Kazakhstan Segment of the Internet” which was the opportunity for our Office to take a closer look at this issue.

Domain names are the “names” of websites that make them easily retrievable, e.g. osce.org.

For every country top level domain (ccTLD) on the Internet, e.g. dot-KZ or dot-DE, there must be rules to administer the registration of Domain Names. Normally a Name Information Center (NIC), e.g. KazNIC, is set up as a Registrar who deals with request for new domain names.

The Representative on Freedom of the Media commissioned a legal review from an independent media NGO to get a clearer picture of what these regulations should look like with a regard to Freedom of Expression. This review raises a couple of questions that are of possible concern for the Office of RFOM. Of course, these questions are not only valid for Kazakhstan but also touch on principles that should be observed in all other countries:

- 1) Is the body that is administering the allocation of Internet Domain names – the Name Information Center (NIC) – for example KazNIC – independent?
- 2) And is it protected from governmental influence?
- 3) Is the allocation of Domain Names guided purely by technical matters of the Domain Name System (DNS)? There should be no judgement by these bodies of the content of a website, this should be left exclusively to courts.
- 4) Is the openness of the Internet maintained? For example there is no necessity to prescribe that content must be hosted within a certain country. Quite the contrary, I am concerned that it might in fact create a problem for freedom of expression. On a worldwide structure like the Internet every publisher should be able to choose freely where he wants his content to be hosted.

Having said this, I would just like to reiterate two of the main principles RFOM repeatedly included in his Recommendations on Freedom of the Media on the Internet:

- 1) State regulation of the Internet should be limited to a minimum and to fields where it is unavoidable. The Internet develops and flourishes best without state interference. At the same time, in the rare cases when regulation is necessary, always the least restrictive approach should be taken.

And

- 2) – as mentioned in the Joint Declaration of RFOM together with Reporters Without Borders - : There should be no obligation of licensing websites and no mandatory registering of websites with state authorities (except for the technical administration of the DNS).

Colin Guard

OBSERVATIONS ON INTERNET FREEDOM AND DEVELOPMENT IN ELEVEN COUNTRIES OF EURASIA

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The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US State Department currently funds the Internet Access and Training Program, a network of 75 free Internet access and training centers in eleven countries of Eurasia. As part of the United States' public diplomacy efforts, the program was created with the aim of bringing the people of Eurasia into closer contact with the people of the United States. It is not primarily a media development program, but does provide journalists and citizens throughout the region with opportunities to obtain information from a variety of sources through the Web and e-mail, to publish articles and websites, and to exchange information through regular online chats.

Most of the time and energy of our staff is spent managing our training program in this geographically far-flung network, maintaining our technical facilities, and organizing online chats for our target audiences of NGO leaders, government officials, educators, journalists and alumni who have returned to their home countries after study in the United States. We do not have the budget or staffing to conduct research on the state of the Internet or media in the countries in which we operate, or to monitor developments in policy in a systematic way. Our unscientific observations about the state of Internet development and effects of government policies are therefore based on the experiences of our staff and users as they go about the business of improving the flow of information both within and across national borders in Eurasia.

Following are a few of the significant observations that emerge from our work, comparing the experiences we have had in different countries.

Government policies and development

We have observed an inverse correlation between the level of Internet development in a given country and the degree of control the government of that country tries to exert over society. The slowest and least reliable Internet services are those in Turkmenistan, with Belarus in second place. Ukraine and Georgia have the most vibrant markets for Internet services and also the most independent civil society actors. Our experience has shown that a controlling government does much more to inhibit development of the Internet than does a low level of economic development. For example, in Tajikistan, whose eco-

conomic development was set back at least a decade by a civil war in the 1990s, we have been witnessing steady development over the last few years, with connectivity options increasing, and prices going down, while neighboring Uzbekistan, which had no civil war and has far greater natural resources, has been in a holding pattern for several years.

Blocking and filtering of websites

Blocking and filtering of websites certainly hinders citizens' access to information, but it is only one small part of the larger problem of administrative pressure on ISPs and other enterprises, which directly affects citizens' access to Internet services. Once people have Internet access, they are often able to get around government blocking measures, although the blocking does make their access to information more difficult. Last week we checked which countries' governments are currently blocking websites, and the results were unsurprising. The most controlling governments are blocking websites and relatively liberal governments are not. Specifically, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Ukraine are not at present blocking any websites to our knowledge, although some of these countries have blocked some websites in the past, mostly in the run-up to elections.

Belarus, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are blocking opposition-related websites and articles critical of the government. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are blocking the largest number of websites and Web pages. At this point I should note that the First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs stated in his remarks yesterday that there is no blocking of websites in Kazakhstan. He is misinformed; there is blocking of websites in Kazakhstan. For example, I checked www.eurasia.org.ru from my hotel room last night and was able to verify that although the website is functional and accessible in other countries, it is not accessible through Kazakhstani Internet channels.

The focus of all of the governments is political opposition, and challenges to the presidents specifically. We are not aware of any blocking of websites on the basis of obscenity or other concerns.

All of the governments that block websites do so unofficially and opaquely. All of them deny that they are doing so. We can deduce that these governments therefore see value in convincing somebody that no blocking is taking place, although we are unsure who that somebody might be.

Sources of news in Eurasia

The most important source of news for our users in the eleven countries in

which we operate is the Russian-language press, which is of course dominated by Moscow-based organizations that reflect the interests of the Putin government. Many of our staff and users consider Russian news sources to be generally biased and sensational. Those of our stakeholders able to read it generally consider the English-language online press more objective, independent and professional. The more liberal countries have respected online newspapers in their national languages, but in other countries the locally-produced news is of such low quality and contains so little information that it is not widely read. The Russian press can be expected to predominate for some time, as our users who can read Russian still outnumber those who can read English by roughly ten to one, and Russia-based websites load faster than US websites from most points in our network, because of geographical proximity. Coverage of local issues is understandably limited in the foreign press, but of course some coverage of local issues is better than no coverage, which is what local outlets in the more repressive countries provide.

Government attitudes toward the Internet

On the positive side, we have not observed that any government is opposed to Internet development per se or sees it as a general threat. All of the governments have programs directed toward development of the Internet, limited in effectiveness mostly by inadequate budgets. No government has taken control over the Internet to the degree that they have taken control of traditional media outlets. Further, the Internet is still reaching a minority of the population in most countries, meaning that the medium has not registered in importance among officials to the extent that television and radio have.

Tentative conclusions

From our perspective, there are very few specific government actions we can cite that have helped Internet development along in Eurasia, but it is easy to cite many policies that have hindered it. Benign neglect would therefore seem to be the most effective policy option, if the goal is an increase in the free flow of information.

Ultimately, Internet development is a choice made by governments to control or not control economic and civil actors. The spirit and effect, if not the letter, of specific policies will flow out of that choice.

Turko Dikaev

MASS MEDIA IN THE REPUBLIC OF TAJIKISTAN: INTERNET GROSSLY MISUSED

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Laws regulating media in the Republic of Tajikistan. Freedom of speech, of the press and the right to use mass media are guaranteed and protected by Article 30 of the Constitution of Tajikistan. Moreover, limiting access to public information is prohibited under Article 25 of the Republic of Tajikistan Law on Information.

Besides, Article 31 of the Law on the Press and Other Media gives journalists the right to seek, obtain and disseminate information by any legal means. In its turn, Article 5 of this law makes it binding on government, political and public organizations, movements, and officials to provide information requested by the media.

In practice, however, access to information, narrow as it is, is further restricted by measures taken in violation of media and journalists rights, to prevent its spreading. These rights are breached in various forms: information is denied outright; journalists are barred access to certain events and places out of “secrecy” and “confidentiality” considerations; requests for information are repeatedly re directed until they finally end up going round in circles.

Self-censorship, taboos, “sacred cows”. As a result, high-ranking corruptionists, the military, the police, narcobarones, the government, parliament and the President are kept well out of the media’s reach, with the curtain lifted an inch or two only when it comes to scandals looked into by the Prosecutor General’s Office or the Supreme Court.

Preventive measures taken by civil servants. The first *Civil Servant v. Media* case was heard in March 2004. Deputy Chairman of the Dushanbe City Court N. Amirov filed a defamation suit against lawyer S. Djurayev for a “libelous” article about him carried by the *Vecherny Dushanbe* weekly of 5 March 2004. This criminal case was heard in the same court under the claimant’s chairmanship. In the course of the proceedings, Djurayev revealed a number of procedural law violations and described them in his article in detail. The case was won by the claimant, with the court ruling that 5,000 somoni (\$1,667) be exacted in damages from the paper’s editors and from the author. That touched off an avalanche of litigations. The last case heard in August 2005 merits a place in the Guinness Book of Records – Mukhtor Bokizoda, editor-in-chief of the independent paper *Nerui Sukhan*, was sentenced to two years of corrective

labour for stealing electric power, of all things.

Computerization of the country: the Internet as a means of filling in newspaper space with reprints, not as a media outlet. We are entering the information society stage, after all, even though a bit later than the developed countries. Information is invading Tajik society and ever more people are engaged in receiving, storing and processing it. Informatization is beginning to permeate all spheres of life – production, science, culture, public education, rest and leisure. New information technologies are becoming a reality in the country which is being computerized at an ever faster rate. Even President Emomali Rakhmonov opened a website of his own on 5 October 2005. Formally, Tajikistan's mass media are part of that virtual world. In reality, they do not always answer their purpose. Each self-respecting publication has a website or a webpage of its own (although not all of these publications really care for their good name, judging by the material they carry). They offer their exclusive information commodities but for a price ("Sorry, this is a paid service!"). Hundreds of on-line pages created with the help of IREX, Relief and other international organizations and sponsors contain junk not worth wasting one's time on. Reigning supreme on these "departmental" pages are the same laws and principles that dominate their hard-copy versions – self-censorship, suppression of important news and information; just for a change, these publications occasionally provoke clashes between Russian- and Tajik-language journalists. Internet journalism, as such, is non-existent in the country. Instead of serving as an inexhaustible source of information for political and economic commentators and analysts, the local Internet offers nothing but reprints. Believe it or not, some papers in our country are filled, from the front page to the last, with Internet reprints having nothing to do with Tajikistan.

Sofia Issenova**INTERNET AND INFORMATION SPACE DEVELOPMENT
IN KAZAKHSTAN*****Telecommunications market development in Kazakhstan: liberalization problems and monopolies***

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The fast-growing telecommunications industry is a crucial factor in the development of the electronic media and Internet in Kazakhstan and is part of the infrastructure that serves to pursue a consistent information policy and to form an electronic government in Kazakhstan.

Therefore, a narrowly sectoral approach often taken to relevant problems is not quite correct.

Successful interactive relationships between the state and the telecommunications sector may take on two forms: public control over communications sector reforms or greater involvement of the government in settling cardinal issues.

Today, society needs badly an adequate adjustment of problems related to telecommunications.

Government policy in the Internet sphere: national security issues or illegitimate regulation?

This year, the Agency for Informatization and Communications [AIC] has adopted the Rules for the distribution of domain space of Kazakhstan's Internet segment.

The document raised a squall of surprised responses and comments both from professionals and amateurs having to do with Kazakhstan's segment of the Internet. Bewilderment bred rumours in the shape of speculations on: What's the big idea? Who stands to gain? Is this a matter of incompetence on the part of core developers or another attempt at imposing censorship and control on information in Kazakhstan's Internet zone? Do the Rules offer a loophole for using them selectively?

As a matter of fact all these questions are about Clause 8.2 which has already become scandalous: "Registration of a domain name may be suspended in the following cases:

2) if WEB-servers the domain names of which are part of the domain name being registered are based outside the Republic of Kazakhstan;

An estimated 50 to 70 per cent of the web servers having the KZ domain name are hosted abroad – in Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere – because it is cheaper and more effective that way. Hosted abroad are the web servers of not merely private individuals or small business companies, but world mega-brands of the KZ segment (www.google.kz, for example), a number of news agencies' sites and web publications popular in Kazakhstan.

AIC experts hold that the adoption of this regulatory document was motivated by national security considerations.

We suggest several scenarios for the development of Kazakhstan's Internet segment and Internet publications.

Obviously, instead of seeking to regulate and control the Internet zone by any means, the government ought to stimulate the development of civilized self-regulation mechanisms. As regards our country and the Authorized Agency, the law makers laying down rules in such a specific sphere as the Internet should, at least, secure the consensus of all the stakeholders. It looks as if an attempt is made to impose on Kazakhstan's Internet some sort of controlled "citizenship" carrying with it clear-cut obligations and minimum benefits.

Formation of electronic government as an element of e-democracy and the common information field in Kazakhstan

The Electronic Government Concept was adopted on 8 June 2004. The National Two-Year Programme for Electronic Government Formation (2005-2007) was approved by the President's Decree in November 2004. The Programme was supplemented with a List of Basic E-Government Services (about 85 services). Mind you, a preliminary analysis shows that 80-90 per cent of these services amount to a mere provision of information, i.e. do not envisage interactive mechanisms of communication between the government, on the one hand, and the public, business community, etc., on the other.

Theoretically, the electronic government is to

- respond to grassroots requests regardless of the way they have been submitted (by telephone, in person, by mail or via a website);

- lower expenses and simplify the procedure of interaction between the business community and the government;
- reduce the government's operating expenses;
- facilitate access for the handicapped;
- enhance government transparency and accountability.

In Kazakhstan, we do not see, most unfortunately, a situation where two processes are running in parallel – that of government service reform towards greater transparency on the strength of real political will, and that of electronic government taking shape.

The government authorities' websites contain minimum information, almost none of them regarded as an adequate source of information either by the public or by journalists.

In our report, we shall present results of national executive agencies' websites review carried out under the GIPI project.

Information policy: no unified integration approach

At present, the Republic of Kazakhstan is in bad need of a well-thought-out and balanced government information policy concept with clearly defined goals, tasks and objectives.

The working out of such concept calls for an in-depth analysis of international experience both in technical spheres and in the sphere of human rights, and for an analysis of its implementation trends and mechanisms, of the outcomes of its impact on the nation's socio-economic, political and cultural progress.

The problem is that information policy is not yet taken in Kazakhstan as a complex phenomenon complete with a multitude of closely intertwined components and subjects that are to make up an integrated system. Over the years, government information policy mostly embraced problems connected with the activities of the mass media and their relationship with the government.

Actually, informatization policy boiled down to providing scientific, technical, production and economic conditions for the development and implementation of information technologies, information infrastructure and an information resources forming system. Informatization policy is practically isolated from the policy pursued by the government in the mass media and telecommunications sectors. The shaping of information policy calls for an analysis of individual sectors and taking geopolitical, foreign economic, socio-economic, scientific, technical and cultural aspects of the country's progress in general.

Today, Kazakhstan is arriving at the perception of information policy as a system of government measures in various spheres of the economy, socio-political life and culture of the nation. So, the awareness and vision of information policy as a qualitatively novel phenomenon incorporating new ICT-based management methods (e-government, etc.) are obviously here. There remain, however, old challenges and threats in the way of the formation of a single information space and information society.

Alo Khodjayev

THE INTERNET MEDIA IN UZBEKISTAN

The on-line media situation in today's Uzbekistan is much like that the country's mass media at large have found themselves in over the recent period. There are some important differences, nevertheless.

First of all, as distinct from the hard-copy press, television and radio broadcasting strictly regulated by a number of laws, there is no legislative act so far specifically targeting Internet publications as mass media. *So far*, I stress, because attempts to legally muzzle all Internet sites are already being made in the country.

Second, this is exactly why liberal analytical Internet publications (of which there are too few, alas) alone offer our free-thinking journalists and political analysts an outlet for airing their views.

Third, for all the impetuous progress being made by information technology, on-line publications (as distinct from the other media) are not yet readily accessible to most people. According to the latest statistics, there are over 800,000 netizens in the country.

Nevertheless, one can say that in Uzbekistan, the Internet has a unique role to play in keeping people informed of the true situation at home and explaining to them various aspects of the Government's foreign and domestic policy.

To begin with, let me say a few words about the progress of information and communications technology [ICT] in Uzbekistan. It would be no exaggeration to say that ICT is infiltrating ever deeper into various spheres of life in Uzbekistan. The Government has adopted a set of instruments aimed at promoting progress in that sphere over the past few years.

This year alone, it has passed the Informatization Development Concept for the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Targets for the Development of Telecommunications, Data Transmission and ICT Application Networks Until the Year 2010, the Programme for ICT Application by Government Agencies and Local Government Bodies Until the Year 2010, the Programme for the Formation and Development of the National Information Retrieval System and others.

The Computer-Related Incident Response Service, the first of its kind in the entire Central Asian region, went into operation early last October. This goes to show that the Government has gone quite far in introducing and promoting information technologies – specifically, in providing for information security.

The Government insists that the resource base of the Internet's national segment be increased, that more information be provided on the economy, culture, art, history and literature of Uzbekistan, on the situation in the spheres of science and education here, especially in the national language because the information the Uznet offers is available in Russian mostly.

Uzbekistan pays special attention to meeting the information requirements of high-school and college students who account for most of the Internet audience. At the end of September, Uzbekistan's ZiyaNET public education information network was introduced with a view to promoting youth education and cognitive information resources in the national segment of the Internet.

Internet is becoming more widespread as a communication medium and a source of information for ordinary people in Uzbekistan. Over the nine months of this year the number of Internet users in the country has increased by 125,000 and now amounts, as I have already pointed out, to over 800,000 of our 26-million population.

The on-line media have a crucial role to play in Uzbekistan. Notwithstanding their limited reach owing to a small number of netizens and to the blocking of access by Internet service providers, they remain, despite total censorship, among the few sources of updated and trustworthy information about what's going on in the country.

Last year, however, the situation in Uzbekistan's on-line media market changed sharply for the worse. The crisis was triggered by the events in Andijan during which access to local on-line publications – and the popular Russian resources such as Lenta.ru, Gazeta.ru and others – was blocked. Previously, Internet publications had been blocked only at random and never suppressed wholesale as is the case now.

Over the past two years our independent journalists have been regularly accused by Uzbekistan's government-dominated press, radio and television of being subservient to the West.

The going is tough for Uzbekistan-based Internet media journalists today. They have no free access to their own sites and, besides, are compelled to take special precautions. Not being subject to registration as mass media or regulated by any legislative acts apparently makes life easier for them but, on the other hand, leaves them vulnerable to persecution.

The on-line media situation in Uzbekistan can be illustrated by the following example. At the recent national Internet festival, independent media were not even entered in the website competition by the qualifying jury for the alleged reason that there was no access to the sites in question from Uzbekistan.

And that despite the statement made by Uzbekistan Foreign Minister Elyor Ganiyev at the 2 June briefing in Tashkent to the effect that “fabrications concerning the Internet go beyond all limits. Internet access restrictions are out of the question today. In the age of modern information technologies, it would be naïve, at the very least, to take the assertions about Internet site blocking seriously”.

The above-mentioned competition’s qualifying jury members – IT experts and journalists – named 44 winners in various nominations and concluded, without further ado, that “if a site would not open, it is its owner’s problem rather than that of the local providers”.

Like other post-Soviet countries, Uzbekistan offers Internet-only publications and on-line versions of the traditional media. Russian and neighbouring countries’ websites and foreign Internet resources are immensely popular.

This review focuses solely on the most sought-after information sites carrying publications of special interest to the general public and to the authorities.

Internet publications first appeared in Uzbekistan in the late 1990s. They drew their materials from various sources mostly and contained practically no original features of their own. As the Internet kept gaining in popularity as a source of information, regular on-line media were formed on the basis of existing resources.

Ferghana.ru, started in the fall of 1998, is among the oldest and more popular Internet sites. It was established by Daniil Kislov, a Muscovite originally from Ferghana. As time went on, he launched news bulletins (reprints mostly), and in August 2001 had the site registered as a media body in Russia. Today, most of the Ferghana.ru content is by its own authors. The site made a name for itself as it covered the March 2005 events in Kyrgyzstan when even Russia’s leading media referred to it for the latest news. The site’s daily audience runs into thousands.

The attendance of the website Uzland.infor – another Uznet old-timer in existence since February 1998, popular before the Andijan crisis – has slipped dramatically of late. The slippage comes from access difficulties owing to blocking and, besides, from scarcity of original site content amid growing Internet user demand for exclusive materials.

The Arena website (Freeuz.org) of the Freedom of Speech and Expression Committee also commands an extensive audience despite its specific media focus. Recently, however, this Tashkent-based website, in existence since February 2004, has expanded its menu to include other topics of current interest besides the media situation.

The Internet portal UzReport.com, part of the *Business Newsletter of the*

East private printed weekly, is one of the country's oldest websites and the all-time attendance leader. Although a private publication, it never makes its own comments on critical issues. Moreover, following the Andijan events, it started the *Truth about Terror* page given over to reprints of explicitly anti-Western articles from the Uzbek press.

The better known traditional media sites include that of the National Information Agency of Uzbekistan – UzA.uz. Opened in December 2000, it is the only on-line source of official government information – hence its high attendance ratings.

The website Vesti.uz, backed by the Russian Federation Embassy, has been functioning in Tashkent since rather recently. Although much of its content is not to be found in the official press, the agency is anything but unbiased. For example, its coverage of the trial of Andijan protesters faithfully echoed the official papers' presentation of it. Quote: "The trial is taking its course, with Uzbek and foreign journalists, diplomats and human rights activists following the proceedings without hindrance. This, however, is what is annoying the West that has taken advantage of this tragic episode in the country's history to discredit Uzbekistan".

Other sources of information for users in Uzbekistan are the websites Centrasia.org, Navigator (Navi.kz) and the Uzbek-language ones: Ozodlik.org and BBCUzbek.com. Incidentally, the latter is accessible to local users notwithstanding the severe criticism the authorities and official press are levelling at the BBC.

Let me now dwell in more detail on the Tribune-uz.info website I have the honour of running. The Tribune-uz.info Internet publication has been in existence since December 2003. At present, the site is one of the few independent Internet publications based in Uzbekistan proper.

The website deals with a broad range of questions having to do with Uzbekistan and other countries of the region. Its main sections are: Politics, Economics, Society, Mass Media, Interviews, Commentaries and Press Reviews. Since its inception, the site has carried over 5,600 features in Russian, Uzbek and English. It invites contributions by journalists from various parts of Uzbekistan, from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Press Reviews section merits special mention: it features weekly reviews and translations of the more interesting and controversial articles from the Uzbekistan press.

On 14 May 2005, i.e. on the day following the events in Andijan, the Tribune-uz website was blocked for Uzbekistan users and can now be accessed only using anonymizers. The Tribune-uz site is targeted on audiences in the

United States, Russia, Uzbekistan, European and other countries (foreign users predominate because local ones use anonymizers to access the site). The site's daily visitors amount to 800 unique users, their number growing manifold on days of emergency situations.

Amid the tightening of censorship on Internet content, the region's leading Internet publications – Ferghana.ru, Tribune-uz.info, Uzland.info, Freeuz.org and Centrasia.org – launched a *Down with Censorship on the Internet* action. The action calls for blacklisting the Internet cafes and providers of Uzbekistan and other countries of the region which block website access and thus deny people a chance to receive information from alternative sources. The shame list of providers and other entities caught censoring Internet media is continuously added to at www.shamelist.ru (incidentally, this website is blocked in Uzbekistan).

In spite of all the difficulties, Uzbekistan's independent Internet publications are carrying on their lofty mission of bringing all those concerned the truth about the uneasy realities of our life.

Alexander Kolosov

INTERNET MEDIA: AN IMPORTANT BUT UNDERUSED TOOL FOR FREE INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION IN KAZAKHSTAN

III

It is logical to consider the “Internet and mass media” problem in connection with other components of the information environment and with account for the Internet’s special role due to globalization, the technical specifics of the traditional media (which determine their high dependence on the publisher) and the information revolution.

According to the latest data produced by Russian researchers, *in Moscow, about 5 of the 9 million inhabitants do not read newspapers or magazines at all today and there are 122 periodical publications acquired by subscription for every 1,000 people, which is less than half the figure for Russia as a whole. The number of books published per person is 22.2 per cent of the 1989 figure. This situation violates people’s rights to receive full, objective, reliable and timely information from printed sources; it engenders conditions for the spiritual impoverishment of the people and manipulation of their consciousness*¹.

Such studies have not been undertaken in Kazakhstan, but the results would probably be no better.

It is natural to suggest that the information gaps might be filled by the Internet, which, in contrast to television, cannot be controlled from a single centre and thus provides an opportunity to make independent decisions.

All applications for the third Kazakhstan Website competition AWARD 2005 are now in, including 18 participants in the On-line Periodicals nomination (without hard copy versions) – seemingly quite a few. A closer look reveals, however, that no more than 4 or at most 5 can really be considered as such.

The others are versions of printed media, databases of recruiting agencies, interest clubs and the like. No one disputes that such publications are necessary, but they have a narrow target audience, so they can really be seen as means of corporate rather than mass information.

The total number of such publications for Kazakhstan is small. Navi.kz and Gazeta.kz are the best known; Prof.in.kz for accountants and market researchers and Mediaprovinzes.kz for journalists. In all, up to about ten at most.

The question naturally arises as to why there are so few information mass

¹ <http://www.businesspress.ru/newspaper/article.asp?mId=1632&aId=83527>

media sites on the Internet. Even given that an Internet publication is in comparison more economical than a printed – let alone broadcast – one, it is much more difficult to exert administrative pressure on it.

The answer is:

- The Internet audience is small: 600,000 regular users out of a population of 15 million. Where is the guarantee, moreover, that the majority of them will take a look at the necessary site? Yet neither can one be sure that a printed newspaper will reach its target audience.
- No one has studied the influence Internet mass media have on their readership – either quantitatively or qualitatively. One can judge only by indirect indicators: the number of Internet users (which is difficult enough to count), the number of visits to sites (if there are counters), the number of participants in Internet voting, the reaction of parliament members and other media to published materials and so on.

The established impression that the Internet is not widely used is probably the main reason that publishers pay so little attention to its information field.

On the other hand, the level of knowledge among journalists about the opportunities offered by the Internet is not high enough. It is regarded merely as a library, a source of information for adding to the large number of pages of periodical publications – hence the scant attention paid to interactive opportunities. They are used only on forums, for discussing published articles. Examples like our project “The History of the Kazakhstan Internet”, when new authors and new sections appear as a result of previous publications, are few and far between.

One cannot but be amazed by journalists who ask questions such as: “Would you tell our readers what the Internet is and how it can be used?” or “Is it true that viruses are going to kill the Internet next year?” That is, the questions would often have been understandable 5-6 years ago, but they are out of place today.

Kazakhstan higher educational institutions have many faculties or departments of journalism, but nowhere is there the possibility of taking the Internet as a special subject. Yet it is clear that not only is this a different means of putting information across, but it also provides much broader opportunities.

Another reason that no such special subject exists yet is that there are few people with practical experience who are prepared to work with students. They

are, indeed, few in number, but there has always been a problem of attracting practical workers into teaching at higher educational institutions. Yet a solution was found. I can state with confidence that, at least in our city, there are highly qualified journalists who are prepared to hand over their experience. For example, Alfia Mingazova and Alexei Sorokin, who run the *Teenager* Internet magazine for adolescents, and are, at the same time, excellent teachers.

The modern media form public opinion – in all spheres, including with respect to formation of their audience. By promoting advanced, broadly accessible technical solutions, helping increase the number of Internet users, journalists could render invaluable assistance in developing our society as a whole. For example:

The idea of a super-cheap computer came from the founder of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab, Nicholas Negroponte. Initially an ordinary desk-top machine was discussed, but they have now moved on to a \$100 laptop. The official presentation will take place in November. The plan is then to supply them in their millions to the developing countries, while the Governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney, wants to buy another half million laptops for schoolchildren in his state.²

The gradual migration to Linux platforms, away from Microsoft software, which dominate here in pirated copies or licensed versions sold at monopoly high prices, is one of the most pressing tasks in resolving a multitude of problems, including those of a legal nature. I would really like our journalists' community to look ahead and not stand up for the corporate interests of current suppliers of full-featured, and consequently expensive, computer technology. This happens not as a result of a desire to resist technical and social progress, but of simple ignorance and inadequate qualifications, meaning that the first thing we need to do is to raise the level of knowledge among journalists with respect to information technology. Besides, progress in the development of hardware and software does not always mean a steady transition to more complex and therefore more expensive technical solutions. It often advances by non-standard routes that are hard to understand if the necessary knowledge is lacking.

Each solution of genius always passes through three stages: "this is totally absurd", "there is something in this" and "how did we live without this?"

In Kazakhstan, the Internet is currently in the second stage, which is dragging out. At the turn of the century, the hopes were much rosier than current reality. Even so, though not as fast as one might wish, the audience is expanding,

² <http://www.membrana.ru/lenta/?4246>

channels are expanding, and the number of sites is growing and their content is improving.

At the same time, the Internet has not yet become a vital daily requirement for a substantial part of the population. The creation of sites is mostly the business of enthusiasts working “for the sake of an idea”. There is no acute need on the part of the education sector, the business community, the government authorities or the mass media for new information technologies. They can get by without them for the time being. The raw material-based economy and a budget based on oil and intermediary trade are part of yesterday and today, but definitely not of tomorrow.

The national electronic government programme has announced serious attention on the part of the government, but it is a long way from announcements to changes in practice. The experience of Eastern Europe and of the former Soviet republics indicates unambiguously that, without government intervention, the vicious circle of “enthusiasm – action – lack of money” cannot be broken. The authorities tend, for some reason, to regard the Internet as a distributor of inappropriate information, rather than a mechanism for implementing government policy. This is a serious but, unfortunately, widespread misconception. In reality, the Internet cannot, in itself, be either “good” or “bad”. It is no more than a tool, and the winner is the one who makes the best of it.

As of today, the main organizers and sponsors of initiatives in the sphere of information technology are international organizations. The public values their contribution, but grants eventually peter out and one would like to think that there will not be too great a gap between support by international organizations and public investment.

Budget funds will not, in themselves, solve anything. There is too great a danger of budget attrition. Working mechanisms are needed. This is the main problem. Yet such mechanisms do exist! They have been set up, among others, by the currently unpopular NGOs.

So, the main task of our organization is to seek out and trigger public initiatives in developing the Internet, including the on-line media.