

IAMCR 2013 Conference Dublin, 25-29 June

Crises, ‘Creative Destruction’ and the Global Power and Communication Orders

Paper title: “Social media, online activism and government control in Kazakhstan”

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Panel: Post-Socialist & Post-Authoritarian societies

Introduction

This paper presents preliminary findings from an ongoing research project on the role of online social media and activism in political processes and political participation in Kazakhstan that uses as a case study the civic conflict in the town of Zhanaozen in 2011 and the engagement of netizens as bloggers in the subsequent events.

The research of this paper is based on fits within the context of online social activism that has been used recently as a new tool for social and political activism in countries like Egypt, Russia, Syria and China which were and some still are driven by authoritarian regimes. Traditional forms of public mass communication are now challenged by internet-based communications worldwide. The internet provides new channels for citizen voices, expression of minority viewpoints, and political mobilisation (Etling, Kelly, Faris & Palfrey, 2010). In countries with restricted media freedom, blogs, online forums, *Facebook* and *Twitter* already provide citizens with a new form of public sphere and alternative source of news and information.

The Zhanaozen case study

The research draws data from blogging sites and printed media that reported on the worst civic conflict in the post-soviet history of Kazakhstan. In December of 2011, during the celebration of the 20th anniversary of Kazakhstan’s independence, oil workers clashed with the state police. These oil workers were on strike since May of 2011 following disputes over pay and working conditions. Authorities claimed that 16 people were killed and 100 were injured during the December uprising. YouTube videos demonstrated that the police fired directly into the large crowd. As a result, the Kazakh President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, imposed a state of emergency in Zhanaozen, and all forms of communication with the rest of the country were cut off, including mobile and internet services (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The government expected that by cutting Zhanaozen from the outside world it would restore peace in the region, however, the lack of information only destabilised the situation.

After one of the first videos was released on YouTube showing police marching towards a group of unarmed protestors and then opening fire, the Kazakhstan’s Prosecutor General’s Office opened a criminal investigation into the security forces’ actions (Lillis, 2011). In the weeks following the clashes in Zhanaozen, the office of the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan at the time of the events, Karim Massimov, invited the country’s most active and popular bloggers to visit Zhanaozen indicating a

change of attitude to the social media among government authorities. The government appeared as willing to address the issues and concerns circulating on the internet about the situation in Zhanaozen via a source which could potentially be trusted more than the pro-governmental media. The name the trip received from the Prime Minister's office was '*Zhanaozen, the witnesses' perspective*'. The invited bloggers, accredited as media; and journalists¹, all ethnic Kazakhs, visited the city, took pictures, twitted, and blogged. As the group mainly reinforced the position of the officials, they were immediately accused by the rest of the Kazakh blogosphere of becoming the 'bloody bloggers' for their support of the government position (Cybernautika.com, 2011, <http://yvision.kz/post/210393>).

As one of the bloggers (Dmitry Shyolokov) who was not part of the Prime Minister's group stated "Kazakh people never had a chance to doubt the fact that the state media is only capable of lying (<http://yvision.kz/post/217205>). Hence, the visit of bloggers to Zhanaozen was taken as a way to cover up the events in Zhanaozen online too". Such a viewpoint triggered an opposition group of bloggers who formed their own team to visit Zhanaozen to report their version of events. The bloggers themselves called their trip '*Bloggers from Zhanaozen: Different Perspective*'.

The Zhanaozen events provide thus an excellent case study for the role online social media can play in the political processes of the post-socialist authoritarian Kazakhstan.

Online media and authoritarian states

Digital media are increasingly used for civic activism (Calingaert, 2010). The Internet is becoming an increasingly important tool for human rights activists to mobilise and advocate for political and socio-economic reforms. It usually provides greater space for free expression than traditional media and in restricted media environments bloggers are often at the forefront of efforts to push the bounds of free expression. It has also become a central medium through which ordinary citizens can express themselves as well as share their ideas. Netizens are at the epicentre of political changes all over the world trying to both resist and to challenge authoritarian states (Reporters Without Borders 2011 report).

Foreseeing the power of the new form of information and communication technologies, authoritarian states all over the globe have come up with both indirect and direct ways to control, filter and manipulate the Internet (Freedom House, 2011). As Calingaert states, internet censorship and surveillance are used by the authoritarian regimes to silence their domestic critics and also to prevent the emergence of political alternative. Online surveillance gives authoritarian governments an opportunity to overlook personal communications as well as to track what citizens read (ibid).

However, it is important to note that the Internet is the least censored medium due to its distributed network. Hence, 'politically sensitive' content which criticises governments is prone to spread online faster than in traditional media (Mou et al, 2011). During the times of crisis, communities receive their information through the Internet as well as through interpersonal communication channels, as recent event in the Middle East and the former Soviet Union republics have demonstrated. The Internet, consequently, has become a potential avenue for dissent (ibid).

¹Journalists of the www.tengrinews.kz and www.bnews.kz Renat Tashkinbayev and Anar Bazmuhametova were also invited.

Deibert and Rohozinski divide the techniques used by governments for Internet censorship and control into three ‘generations’. The first generation of techniques focuses on ‘Chinese-style’ Internet filtering and Internet-café surveillance. ‘Second generation’ techniques include the construction of legal environment legitimising information control, authorities’ informal request to companies for removal of information, technical shutdowns of websites, and computer-network attacks. ‘Third-generation’ techniques include warrantless surveillance, the creation of ‘national cyber-zones’, state-sponsored information campaigns, and direct physical action to silence individuals or groups (MacKinnon, 2011). Deibert and Rohozinski point out that a number of governments, particularly in Russia and in several former Soviet republics, have by-passed the first-generation controls almost completely and instead are concentrating their energies on second- and third-generation controls, most of which are more subtle, more difficult to detect and more compatible with democratic and pseudo democratic institutions (MacKinnon, 2011).

When an authoritarian regime embraces and adjusts to the inevitable changes brought by digital communication, the result is what MacKinnon calls ‘networked authoritarianism’. In the networked authoritarian state, the single ruling party remains in control while a wide range of conversations about the country’s problems nonetheless occurs on websites and social-networking services. The government follows this online chatter, and sometimes people are able to use the Internet to call attention to social problems or injustices and even manage to have impact on government policies. In the networked authoritarian state, there is no guarantee of individual rights and freedoms. Those whom the rulers see as threats are jailed; truly competitive, free, and fair elections are not held; and the courts and the legal system are tools of the ruling party (MacKinnon, 2011).

Media, Internet and Censorship in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan declared its independence from the Soviet Union on the 16th of December of 1991, and it was the last USSR republic to do so. Its former Soviet leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev, became Kazakhstan’s first President, a position he still retains today. Despite the high hopes for the emergence of democracy in Central Asia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (A Sobering Reality, 2012), Kazakhstan is still viewed today as an authoritarian state (see Economist’s Democracy Index, 2012) where the President plays the role of ‘the highest state office, responsible for naming the government and all other republic’s officials’ (Kekic, 2007). The President’s influence extends to media too as his family controls the majority of newspapers and television stations, including the state television company – Khabar (Cummings, 2003).

At a glance, Kazakhstan appears to have a strong media industry, including over 2,500 published regularly newspapers and magazines. Private mass-media make up nearly 80 per cent of all the existing mass media. There are also 238 representatives of online media, as well as 100 television and radio stations (eGov, 2012). However, in spite of a large volume of periodical publications and other forms of media, Kazakhstan was ranked 182 out of 196 countries in the Freedom of Press 2013, and 26th out of 29 countries of the former Soviet Union republics (Freedom House, 2013). Freedom House also indicated that the authorities have narrowed the space for independent voices even further in 2012 by banning around 40 opposition media outlets, one of which was the main national opposition news organisation, and stepping up violence and legal prosecution of the remaining independent and critical journalists (RWB, 2013). World Press Freedom Index 2013 (RWB, 2013) suggested that President Nazarbayev’s government ‘moved closer to the ultra-authoritarian model of its neighbours in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan’. Such statistics clearly

indicate the existence of tight control over media by Kazakh government and the presence of strong censorship that also spills over Internet.

Initially, Kazakhstan's government considered the internet as a new source for strengthening its economic position in the Central Asia region by becoming the information-technology hub of the region. According to the World Economic Forum's Networked Readiness Index 2012, Kazakhstan is the top-ranked country of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in terms of information and communication technologies (ICT) and digital uptake. The government has made the development of digital information technologies a national priority resulting in a few attempts to liberalise the communication sector and promoting the Internet usage by civilians (Nichol, 2012).

However, the government has realised the democratising power of the Internet and tried to control access to it (The Freedom House, 2011). Kazakhstan's general prosecutor has publicly spoken out in favour of increased control of social networks, calling it 'the evil' (A Sobering Reality, 2012). In 2009, a new bill was passed equating Internet resources with other media, allowing the government to interfere in the content of national and international internet resource available in Kazakhstan. Since 2011, 160 websites were blocked or access to them was limited for allegedly spreading "extremist" propaganda. LiveJournal was one of them (Reutskiy, 2012). As the events were unfolding in Zhanaozen, the authorities blocked the access to Twitter temporarily. The online video portal www.stan.kz which was covering events in Zhanaozen was sued by the authorities for health and safety reasons. Another news website, www.guljan.org, was subjected to cyber-attacks in 2011, and one of its reporters was convicted with criminal charges; the website was later blocked (A Sobering Reality, 2012).

Despite the government intervention with Internet, over the past ten years the Internet access in Kazakhstan has grown dramatically – from 0.7 per cent penetration rate in the year 2000 to 28 per cent, which corresponds to 4.3 million people, by the end of 2010 (The Freedom House, 2011). There are more than seven thousand registered websites in Kazakhstan. Kazakhtelecom is the largest telecom company holding a 73 per cent share of the market for internet and data communications and offers broadband internet access in all major cities and regions (Kazakhtelecom Annual report, 2011). State-run Internet Service Provider (ISP) – Kazakhtelecom, dominates the internet and mobile market and regularly blocks the websites which publish 'sensitive for the government' information, including www.respublika-kaz.info and www.k-plus.tv.net. Both of these websites are sponsored by the political opposition in exile. To further control the Internet, the government established new regulations, according to which all domain owners in the top-level domain .kz must route their traffic through servers which are physically located in Kazakhstan.

The 2008 blocking of LiveJournal, at the time the most popular blogging platform in Kazakhstan, generated significant changes to the country's blogosphere. Before it was blocked, LiveJournal hosted 32 per cent of all active Russian-language blogs in Kazakhstan, or nearly 230,000 users. Some bloggers migrated to other international platforms like blogger.com or LiveInternet.ru, while others retained their blogs on LiveJournal but used a proxy server to access it. One of the local blogging sites, Yvision.kz, has emerged as the most popular Kazakhstan-based blog-hosting platform, with over 14,000 users blogging mostly in Russian (Open Society Foundation, 2013).

In an effort to counter criticism of the blocking of LiveJournal and demonstrate a willingness to engage with citizens online, government officials started to keep their own blog in recent years. The

initiative appears to have attracted little attention and had a limited impact on public opinion as the blogs generally resemble other government press portals in style and content (Freedom House, 2011).

In addition, Kazakhstan and its Central Asian neighbours have focused their attention on online security threats. The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) which includes Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, is now looking at mechanism to control social networking sites in order to prevent 'extremist' actions, like those seen in Tunisia and Egypt in the year of 2011.

The horizontal nature of the Internet empowers citizens to generate and disseminate content. Internet makes the flow of information published online more difficult to control by the authorities but there several ways of controlling the information reaching netizens as the Zanhaoren case demonstrates in this research. The control of digital media is also more intrusive and affects a larger number of people than restrictions of traditional forms of media (Calingaert, 2010).

Methodology

This research seeks to identify how online social network media are used by netizens and political activists in Kazakhstan using the Zanhaoren events as a case study. It also attempts to identify how the government handles control of the internet and engages with the online social media and tries to indirectly identify the impact the events under study have had on the online political activism in Kazakhstan.

The research is exploratory in nature as little or no data has been available and initial investigations were required to determine the boundaries of more extensive work to follow (Given, 2008). In line with most exploratory studies which tend to be qualitative-data dominated (*ibid*), this research takes a predominantly qualitative oriented **content analysis** approach in order to map the blogging activities, and with elements of **discourse analysis** at a later stage. Qualitative content analysis examines significant aspects of texts that are not amenable to quantitative methods. It can also reveal evidence and patterns that are difficult to notice through casual observations (Baumeister & Vohs, 2012). By **mapping** and analysing the blogging sites content and participation, the researchers hope to identify netizens' activities in Kazakhstan's blogosphere.

Framing theory was employed as an analytical tool. Framing theory, a relatively new communication theory, is looking at how certain information is used to make an issue for people's knowledge and understanding (Tiung & Hasim, 2009). The information about a particular issue or topic is selected and spread carefully and people's interpretation of certain events is based on their knowledge, interests and needs. In other words, framing is important as it has an influence on how people see and interpret a particular issue (*ibid*). Framing is useful when it comes to understanding the media's role in political life. Within this study, the framing theory provides understanding of the role of online social media on political processes in Kazakhstan by analysing information posted online as well as of that published in Kazakhstan's press.

A key framing concept employed here is the 'law and (dis)order', used in analysis of media representations of protests and demonstrations. Protests tend to be labelled as deviant and by

emphasizing drama, spectacle and violence, media de-ligitimize their aims and politics (Cottle & Lester, 2011, p. 62).

Data collection

Data collection covers a period of three months, from 16 December 2011 (when the events started) to 27 March 2012 (when the trials of the 37 oil workers began). The blogging websites *YVision* and *Livejournal* were the primary focus of analysis. These sites were chosen because of their popularity in the Kazakhstan's blogosphere. In addition, two Kazakhstan national newspapers (*Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and *Respublika*), including the online version of the *Respublika*, were included as they both represented the mainstream traditional media. These newspapers provide a comparative context against which the blogging sites are positioned in terms of content.

- www.yvision.kz – Kazakhstan's main blogging platform. The website includes the blogging platform itself, online-TV and special projects both in Russian and Kazakh.
- www.livejournal.com – Russian social networking website. Users can either keep a blog, a journal, or a diary. The service is also used for political commentary, in Russia in particular. This website was initially selected due to the fact some members of the opposition in exile used this particular blogging website for communication with the Kazakhstan's blogosphere.
- *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* is the Kazakhstan's national newspaper and the main official and business information source in the country. Legislative documents come into effect once they are published in the newspaper.
- *Respublika* is the opposition private newspaper known for its critical articles about the government and corruption. It was forced to cease printing in 2012 as a result of a government-initiated lawsuit; it is now available only online (Open Society Foundations, 2013).
- *Respublika portal* – www.respublika-kz.info – online space for experts' discussion on political processes and issues in both Central Asia and Russia.

In order to retrieve the whole list of blogs created on both LiveJournal and YVision (available during the data collection time), a search engine was used on both of the websites and also through the links which were available on websites, using the following key words: Zhanaozen, Zhanaozen uprising 2011, Zhanaozen protests, the oil workers of Zhanaozen, the mass killings of the oil workers in Zhanaozen.

In the process of identifying the blogging sites and creating content categories, it was soon realised that the LiveJournal platform was not used as much as expected by the Kazakh bloggers since it was blocked in the country, and not many knew how to use the proxy services. Instead the main blogging platform turned out to be the www.yvision.kz website. The so-called 'bloody bloggers' mainly used the www.yvision.kz website to write about their trip to Zhanaozen. Those who went on a separate, independent trip to Zhanaozen, were posting their blogs and comments on the same website too.

The PDF versions of the two newspapers were used. *Respublika* website was included as it provides quick news updates which were useful in documenting the unfolding of the Zanhaoren events. It is also often used like a blogging platform where people can comment on the posts/articles which added another dimension of online community's commenting on the events under study.

Identifying data categories

A **two stage content analysis** was conducted. The **first stage** was seen as the general **mapping** of the content and participants. The following five questions, informed by literature were developed for the initial content analysis stage which generated separate **themes** with **sub-themes** used in the subsequent qualitative content analysis stage:

- How was the conflict in Zhanaozen **framed**?
The preliminary research identified the main sub-themes: *socio-economic issues; law and (dis)order; political instability caused by the opposition in exile; political instability caused by the internal force; conspiracy; and other.*
- Who was the **voice** of the events?
The following were identified: *national government; army; police; protesters; Kazakhstan Prosecutor's General office; the oil company – KazMunaiGaz; and political opposition both inside and outside of Kazakhstan.*
- What is the story **subject** of the news reports/ blogs?
The three main subjects included: *discussions about social networking websites; socio-economic issues; and the role of printed media and TV in the events of Zhanaozen.*
- What story **sources** are used?
- What is the main **language** of blogging? (Russian, Kazakh or English)

The early mapping of content and participants also identified the following main three groups of bloggers: those selected by the government to visit the city also known as the '*bloody bloggers*'; those who went on a trip to Zhanaozen independently, called by others the '*free bloggers*'; and the remaining bloggers who either supported the first or the second group or remained neutral.

Findings

There was a clear distinction between those bloggers, all ethnic Khazaks, who went on the organised trip to Zhanaozen and appeared supportive of the current political regime in Kazakhstan and those who acted independently and formed a group of 'opposition', including a few ethnic Russians and Russian speaking. The remaining bloggers engaged in posting on this event either took sides with either group or followed discussions from a neutral position. Interestingly, this third group was the most vocal and posted a number of messages regarding the events in Zhanaozen, as well as actively commented on the blogs posted by others.

Framing

The following sub-themes emerged from the findings: *socio-economic issues; law and (dis)order; political instability caused by the opposition in exile; political instability caused by the internal force; conspiracy; and other.* Political instability and law and disorder were two of the key emerging framing perspectives. New Kazakhs or Oralmans (ethnic Kazakhs) seem to become a scapegoat, accused by some to be the cause of the instability.

Respublika newspaper and the bloggers who either did not go to Zhanaozen on an organised trip or went there by themselves – the 'free' bloggers, believe the source of the problem is the current socio-economic conditions both in the region and in the country which have led to the uprising in Zhanaozen. These problems were identified as social injustice, inability of the local and state

authorities to intervene and solve the emerging issues, class struggle of particular members of the society, ethnic tensions among Kazakhs and newly migrated Oralmans, lack of job opportunities, poverty, access to all natural resources by a particular group of people which is close to President Nazarbayev and the working conditions of the protesting oil workers.

The 'law and disorder' aspect seemed to be another emerging theme among bloggers. Some bloggers, mainly those who went on a trip organised by the government authorities, pointed at the recent immigration of the Oralmans into the region from other countries e.g., China, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. According to some of them, the Oralmans might be responsible for the Zhanaozen uprising. Blogger *Zhomart* states that the police forces were not firing its bullets at the individuals but at the extremists who were attacking the constitutional order in the country. The protestors were terrorists, he concludes (<http://yvision.kz/post/216750>).

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda (KazPravda) was looking at events from a 'law and disorder' perspective suggesting that the protests were started by hooligans. The bloody bloggers agree with this interpretation adding that some forces have used the oil workers to cause the havoc in the region. It suggested that some forces are trying to destabilise Kazakhstan by breaking up the Kazakh society into small groups that questions Kazakhstan's integrity, unity and stability. The fact that Kazakhstan is integrating economically with both Russia and Belarus might have upset some states – was also named as one of the possibilities by *KazPravda*.

In the *Respublika* newspaper, the events in Zhanaozen were linked to 'socio-economic issues' which the government was trying to suppress so that they would not lead to political instability in the country as a result. Hence, the army's involvement in the conflict gets justified. As quoted by *Respublika*'s portal, Kozlov, one of the opposition leaders currently imprisoned, believes the government will be using this uprising as an excuse to implement some radical political measures. The portal also suggests that 'law and disorder' can be one of the possible frames for describing the events in Zhanaozen in 2011.

Other bloggers believe that the events in Zhanaozen in 2011 demonstrate the 'instability within the country'. They suggest that it all could have been the provocation of a particular political group within Kazakhstan to get to the power after Nazarbayev leaves his posts. Hence, the political elites are trying to destabilise the situation in the country to approach the Leader of the Nation, President Nazarbayev and to discuss the succession plans. 'Political instability' caused by the opposition in exile was another prominent topic. One of the 'bloody bloggers' suggests that the events in Zhanaozen had nothing to do with the oil workers; instead, someone took advantage of them and the situation.

The conspiracy theories have been quite prominent. Bloggers suggest that the US' State Department could have been involved, as well as other western countries, to get access to the Caspian Sea and its oil reserves (<http://yvision.kz/post/240112> , <http://yvision.kz/post/213733>). Others² have suggested that there is a number of strategic objectives set by those who wish to destabilise the political situation in Kazakhstan. One of them is to cut China off the energy resources; the same was done in Libya. Another goal is to weaken the southern borders or Russia and to create the geopolitical chaos alongside the world's longest border. The possible disintegration of the Custom

² <http://yvision.kz/post/213733>, <http://yvision.kz/post/214395> and
<http://zarinamerkel.yvision.kz/post/215098> <http://yvision.kz/post/217059>, <http://yvision.kz/post/220827>

Union between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus and the avoidance of the creation of the Eurasian Union was named the above bloggers too. At the same time other bloggers suggest it is unwise to blame the US in this situation; some former Kazakhstan citizens might be involved (<http://yvision.kz/post/219176>).

Voice

The following groups were identified as the main quoted voices in the reported news items and blogging sites: *government, army, police, Kazakhstan's Prosecutor General, the KazMunaiGaz oil company, political opposition and protesters* themselves. In the course of the data mining processes, it became evident that the government, the army, the police and the prosecutor general represent the same voice – the official voice of the Kazakh authorities, centred around President Nazarbayev. The state-run media used the voices of the governmental officials mainly.

The primary voices in the articles published in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* were the local authorities, the Prosecutor General, the academics who supported the government's assertions, the WWII veterans and the bloggers who went on a trip to Zhanaozen which was organised by then the Prime Minister, Karim Massimov.

The voices of the *Respublika* newspaper were the oil workers themselves, their relatives, the local governmental representatives, as well as one member of the European Parliament – Paul Murphy. The newspaper also voiced the information provided by what they called the inside sources, members of opposition parties as well as of bloggers. The *Respublika portal* voiced the interests of the local citizens of Zhanaozen, as well as of representatives of the UN, OSCE and the US State Department. Kazakhstan's political opposition in exile and its prominent representative Mukhtar Ablyazov, were also voiced.

The 'bloody bloggers' mainly referred to the official sources, such as the akimat (mayor's office), the police and the general prosecutor's office. During their visit to Zhanaozen, they have also interviewed the new representative of the KazMunaiGaz oil company. Some locals were interviewed by the 'bloody bloggers'. However, as blogger Sadenova noted, people on the streets of Zhanaozen were very quiet about the events; hence the bloggers were only able to get couple of comments. Most times, people said they did not hear nor see anything. The group of the 'bloody bloggers' had also interviewed some people at the Zhanaozen hospital. As Sadenova described it, the bloggers shut the doors and started talking to the patients. Some said that they have heard of some people missing and being held by the police. When one of the bloody bloggers asked whether they can name any, or if they know of anyone personally, the patient said 'no'. However, one may wonder how open they could have been given it was all video-taped.

The oil workers, their families and the locals of Zhanaozen were the voice of the 'free bloggers'. Many interviews were recorded and uploaded to YouTube, hence the blogging turned into the vlogging. By sharing the video interviews with the rest of the world, they were hoping for a wider coverage as well as the involvement of the international community.

One of the first journalists who visited Zhanaozen was the Russian journalist – Elena Kostyuchenko. She covered the case of one of the civilians not connected with the oil workers, or the protesting movement for that matter, but got held up by the police, beaten up and died. This story was widely commented on and discussed in the Kazakhstan's blogosphere, and by the 'free bloggers' in particular.

Those who did not go to Zhanaozen referred to both - the officials and the oil workers. Some were referring to either one of the group of bloggers who went on the trip to Zhanaozen. Also, the voices of some of the political scientists were mentioned too.