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Internet Conversations in Central Asia: Chats, Forums, and Access to Information
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Abstract
This article argues that Central Asia chat sites are online and real-world community builders that can transcend geographic boundaries from the information repressed to the global flow of free information. Chat and forums can enable users in Central Asia to gain information that is otherwise not domestically available and share it with offline domestic communities. Because youth is the dominant demographic group participating in chat and forum sites, these online exchanges and communities are likely to have important longer-term implications for information seeking and expectations of new and traditional media.

Introduction
The collapse of the Soviet Union left the five newly independent Central Asian countries with the need to rebuild systems of government and industry, create new national identities, and respond to a sea of regional and international influences. The emergence of these independent post-Soviet states occurred simultaneously with the global revolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that introduced the Internet and mobile phones to the Central Asian region. At the same time, governmental policies throughout the region repress and censor traditional and Internet media and limit political, civil, and religious freedoms. Despite the decaying Soviet telecommunication infrastructure and government censorship of media, the spread of ICTs to Central Asia opens new possibilities for local populations to tap into worldwide sources of information, socialize, exchange ideas, and participate in public debate.

Research on the online chats and forums focused on the region’s myriad transition processes is one of the most vibrant areas for exploring the emergence and adoption of new ICTs in Central Asia. These chat and forum sites allow participants, located both inside and outside the region, to engage with online counterparts to voice opinions on a vast range of issues pertinent to the region’s transformation—and often these are views that would normally be quashed in traditional media. This analysis of chat and forum sites, therefore, enables us to better understand the emerging Internet culture in Central Asia, the linkages between on- and off-line communities in Central Asia, and the implications of new sources of information in a restrictive media environment.

Most existing studies on the use of chat and forum sites investigate users and applications in relatively developed, democratic, and technologically advanced societies.

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1 Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are the newly independent states of Central Asia.
As a result, these existing studies miss the importance of how online interactions might allow participants to transcend local, offline constraints on information. In line with some of this scholarship, we argue that the online communities that develop in chats and forums are critically related to real-world social interactions and social networks. In addition, however, we argue that, because of the varied geographic location of participants in a given chat or forum site, users are able to develop connections to the global sphere, which offer opportunities to circumvent the repression and censorship of information by local governments. Chat and forum sites allow participants to access information that is otherwise not domestically available and share it with offline communities. As a majority of Central Asia’s chat and forum participants are young people (under 30), these patterns of use have important implications for future expectations of media and critical ramifications for online and offline communities.

To make these arguments, we employ cross-country survey data and analyze the content of online discussions to explore the use of chat and forum sites and the emergence and evolution of opinions, global connections, and offline implications for community within the region. In addition to analyzing general trends of Internet use and information seeking behavior in Central Asia, we have gathered and analyzed data of the technical format, demographics, and social dynamics of the chat rooms and forums in order to understand why and how people are using chats and forums in the region. This study has important implications for understanding the sources of information available to and the attitudes of the region’s youth population, the dominant demographic group of Internet and chat and forum users. Moreover, this study extends to analysis of how these technologies take root in a technology-emergent society like Central Asia, with important implications about the different attitudes toward and practices of adopting technology in other developing countries around the world.

Context

On- and offline communities are critical units of analysis for our study. In Central Asia, offline communities, or social networks, typically consist of extended family, neighbors, and close personal relationships, such as classmates, and are less commonly associated with the impersonal ties that are often used as markers of Western civil society or social capital (Putnam 1993; Tocqueville 1838). Despite the many modernization processes of the Soviet system, the reliance on close and personal social ties actually increased during the Soviet era as society became atomized and distrustful due to the terroristic policies of the communist party and Soviet secret police (Jowitt 1992). Neighborhood committees, traditional community institutions of self-help and dispute arbitration in several of the post-Soviet Central Asian countries, were co-opted by the state during the Soviet era (Kamp 2004), and this co-option continues today or has discredited and caused the disintegration of the traditional neighborhood networks. As a result, very personalized patterns of social networking and community building became vital for access to information and opportunities in the Soviet era. These types of social networks remain significant today.

Throughout the Central Asian region, national governments control the information available in local news media and only report positive or non-controversial
As a result, traditional social networks distribute information about local and international news, goods and services, and provide important alternatives to tightly regulated state information services. Moreover, decaying Soviet telecommunications infrastructure limits the access households have to information. For example, even in urban areas some households still do not have phone lines, and the situation is much worse in rural areas where entire villages may not have landline telephone access. According to data from the International Telecommunication Union, for example, fixed line penetration through the Commonwealth of Independent States is only 37 percent of that in Western Europe (ITU 2005). In urban areas, the Internet is present, but expensive and inconvenient, as most use occurs at public access sites such as Internet cafes. Indeed, in a survey we conducted throughout Central Asia in 2006, 48.7 percent of respondents who use the Internet indicated that they usually do so from Internet cafes. Thus, local residents rely heavily on family and friends for “real” news, a practice that leads to confusion, muddied transmission of information, and rumor, even about critically important local events such as Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution in March 2005 and the Andijon uprising in Uzbekistan in May 2005. However, chat and forum sites offer important new alternative sources of information and discourse on local and international current events and issues.

These new electronic media are especially important in a region characterized with a “youth bulge,” a larger ratio of young people to older generations. As is common around the globe, use of Internet and related technologies is strongly correlated with age: Younger people are more common adopters and regular users of these new technologies. This situation is especially true in Central Asia, where close to 50 percent of the region’s population is under 30 years of age and almost 33 percent is 15 to 29 years of age (International Crisis Group 2003: 1). In Central Asia, this young demographic group is most dominant in new ICT use, especially Internet and chat and forum usage, and the youth exposure to these new technologies and media is likely to have important implications for future demand of communication and information sources. Indeed, this paper begins to develop an understanding of the relationship between the youth bubble and ICTs and the implications for community building and information seeking in Central Asia and elsewhere.

Existing Scholarship on Chat and Forum Sites

Although they are new media, web-based chats and forums are already recognized as interesting and important subjects of research. Using common terminology, we define chat sites as resources that allow people to communicate online in real-time. Most basically, they are virtual rooms where several people gather for communication on a variety of topics, and this communication takes several possible forms: a user is able to send messages addressed to everyone in the main room; a user can communicate one-on-one by addressing his/her messages directly to a specific person in the main room; or a

2 In fact, Reporters without Borders has rated Central Asian governments among the world’s lowest in press and Internet freedoms, even labeling several of the local governments “enemies of the Internet” [6].

user can start a “private” chat with any person present in the main room, which will take place in a separate room within the chat site. Usually, when entering a chat room, one registers with a personal login and password, and users recognize each other by their login names. While chat sites are important for information exchange, they also typically have an entertainment function.

Forum sites are also considered a tool for communication, but they are different from chats in their methods of communication. Forums are structured around specific, well-defined topics and visitors ask questions and share their views according to the topics. Usually, forums employ a form of communication where users communicate asynchronously posting messages simultaneously or with gaps in time between posts. Thus, forums, unlike chats, are more often used for substantive debates because more time is allowed for participants to think about and justify their postings. They also have stricter rules of behavior for users, and administrators moderate the parameters of discussions; the rules in the forums are stricter than in chats.

Recent research on chats and forums focuses on important practical considerations such as applications and design implications in workplace settings (O’Neil and Martin 2003). Other studies analyze how chat site discussions push boundaries of cultural norms in individual societies (Kim 2001; Al-Saggaf and Wecker 2004). Important for our study, a body of literature focuses on the development and maintenance of online communities. For example, these studies explore the creation of new rules and mechanisms to moderate social behavior in the virtual spaces (Matsuda, Miyake, and Kawai 2002), the creation of new self- and collective identities through chat room language practices (Lam 2004), and how those identities are supported through powerful community-like environments (see, for example, Tepper 1997; Bays 1998; Kitalong and Kitalong 2000; Valverde 2002; Lam 2004; Shoham 2004). Finally, some studies have proposed that “cyberspace may act as a ‘salve’... where there are barriers to the development of communities” (Reymers 2002).

Matsuda, Miyake, and Kawai (2002) explore how existing social mechanisms and modes of behavior are recreated in the virtual spaces. Using non-participant observations of online communities, they argue that virtual places have many usual social attributes and mechanisms, such as manners, etiquette, and mechanism to discourage and/or shun “anti-social behaviors.” These virtual societies, they argue also introduce new rules for online behavior that are rarely seen in real life. They are particularly interested in how these virtual societies form a culture that dictates user activities. While offering important insights on the generation of culture and rules within virtual societies, the authors pay little attention to the links between participants in virtual and real-world communities and networks, the importance of online communities as alternative sources of information, and the ability of virtual communities to circumvent repressive local media environments.

Lam (2004) undertakes a case study analysis of language practices and social relationships among immigrant Cantonese speakers living in the United States and elsewhere. She argues that these online language practices have important implications for language learning in local contexts. Based on close observation of two high school aged immigrant girls, Lam finds that participation in online chat and forum sites that allow for mixtures of Cantonese within primarily English language discussions increases comfort and confidence in offline verbal communication in English. These mixed-
language chat discussions also allow participants to assume new self- and collective identities based on language practices. Although a micro-study of the implications of chat use, these findings have important potential implications for understanding identity and community formation through chat and forum usage. Lam’s study, however, does not differentiate among the uses of chat and forum sites for information seeking, communication, or pure entertainment.

Shoham (2004), by contrast, does explore the communication, information-seeking, and community-building aspects of chat room usage. In his words, “People enter magical chat-room doors to bond socially, to look for solutions to personal problems, or to satisfy a need for affiliation with a community” (Shoham, 2004: 855). Through his ethnographic study of a chat room for Israelis in their 40s and 50s, Shoham argues that online communities consist of real social members and thus reflect real world social interrelations. He concludes that virtual spaces and communication tools such as forums and chats create virtual communities that sometimes turn into enduring offline networks. Exploring the links between online and offline communities is therefore a potentially productive way for generating “deeper and thicker understanding of modern-day community members” (Ibid, 856). Shoham’s finding is important but its scope is limited to the relatively liberal media environment in Israel, the older population observed, and the observations of the local social relations that develop. We extend his argument to our analysis of the correlations between online identity formation in a youth population and linkages between local and global social relations and information sources in repressive media environments. This widening of the scope of study has important implications for situations where the global sphere may offer opportunities for opposition or resistance to the hegemonic power exerted by the local government on its subjects.

Indeed, Valverde (2002) explores how an Internet chat room or a forum creates a non-geographically bound community. Working from transnational perspective on cultural flows and social networks, Valverde explores affiliations between Vietnamese-Americans and Vietnamese nationals in virtual communities. Valverde argues that virtual communities are a safe environment in which Vietnamese-Americans can retain or develop ties to the “homeland” through friendly postings, networking projects, and activities that have direct impact on social and political change in Vietnam. Valverde argues that through the virtual space on the Internet, the Vietnamese-American community and their Vietnamese counterparts are able to achieve relative freedom in expressing an array of political and personal points of view with a lesser degree of self-censorship than they would be pressured to adopt in their respective societies. Through virtual communities, citizens in Vietnam and the overseas population have engaged in meaningful dialogue and developed safe spaces to discuss controversial topics. Valverde also argues that Vietnamese-Americans use chat rooms as a communication tool, and English and Vietnamese languages are both involved in constructing the transnational community of Vietnamese-Americans.4 Finally Valverde explores how the Vietnamese

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4 We also find that the choice of a single language (Russian, national languages, English, other language) and/or hybrid language use is an important communication devise in blurring region and global geographical boundaries online. In a related project study, Wei and Kolko (2005) explore how people in Uzbekistan adapt their linguistic behavior and language choices to the Internet and express themselves in culturally meaningful ways without being subsumed by a global agenda.
government has attempted to introduce ICTs in a manner that preserves its political
dominance while at the same time the diaspora has successfully participated in
Vietnamese nation building discussions. We draw on Valverde’s analysis to explore
many important parallels for identity formation and language use, local-global
community building, and resistance from government actors in Central Asian chat and
forum sites.

Although the body of scholarship discussed above has developed to quantify and
qualify the development of online communities, there remains a lack of literature on the
offline effects of online communities. Examining how chats and forums allow
participants to circumvent the repressive local media environment, our study takes an
important step to address this lacuna. Moreover, most existing studies on the use of chat
and forum sites investigate users and applications in relatively developed and democratic
societies. As a result, these existing studies miss the context in which Central Asian chat
and forum participants develop their online practices and communications and how
online interactions might allow participants to transcend local constraints on information.

Because the post-Soviet Central Asian region is characterized as low in informal social
networks and social capital and restricted in information resources, understanding the
nature of online community as offering new sources of information is an especially
important contribution of our analysis. We, therefore, argue that online communities are
important alternatives to local media and other information sources, especially to the
extent that they allow participants to transcend local community ties and link with
participants in other geographic areas. Moreover, these online interactions have
important implications for real-world social networks.

Methodology for Examining Chats and Forums in CA

This study employs both survey data and participant observations of chat and
forum sites focusing on Central Asia. These two methods allow us to make general
observations about Internet and information-seeking behavior throughout Central Asia, as
well as specific observations about chat and forum usage patterns.

The survey instrument was designed by a team of researchers from the University
of Washington in Seattle. The survey is part of a multi-year, multi-phase project on
patterns of ICT adoption and adaptation in Central Asia. Given the low rate of current
Internet penetration in Central Asia, the 2006 survey also focuses on pre-existing patterns
of information use, information seeking behavior, and levels of trust in various producers
and sources of information. The survey was administered in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,
Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in January–March 2006 by BRIF Research Group, a survey
firm in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The survey sample was based on census information on age,
gender, ethnicity, and geographic location released by the government of each country.
The survey was administered in urban and rural areas from several regions of each
country, and the survey sample size was 1,000 respondents, aged 15 and older. The
sample includes 50 sampling locations, and 12-29 respondents were interviewed in each
location. The survey will be repeated annually for three years. These results will be used

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5 Emblematic of this approach are studies claiming that the Internet promotes open, democratic debate and
allows for multiple perspectives (Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997; Putnam 2000; Rheingold 1993). Other,
more sober scholars, remind us, however, that the Internet offers opportunities for enhanced government
control and surveillance (May 2002; Yang 2003; Kalathil and Boas 2003).
as a baseline for future comparisons, allowing researchers to track change over time as ICT use in the region becomes more widespread. The survey evidence is reported below to establish important baseline information on use of and attitudes toward the Internet and other information and communication technologies among Central Asian respondents.

In addition, from January to April 2006 and in March 2007, we used participant observation of a number of chat and forum sites focusing on Central Asia. Through Internet search engines, recommendations from local citizens, and consulting with local research assistants, we selected the most popular chat and forum sites in each of the five Central Asian countries.\(^6\) Drawing on the existing body of scholarship on chats and forums, we analyzed the Central Asia chat sites according to stated purposes of the sites; target audiences; categories and numbers of actual users; patterns of use; substance of discussions concerning development of community, transboundary ties between local Central Asian chat and forum participants and their counterparts in other geographic locations, and use of chats and forums as alternative information sources or as a venue for discussions that would be repressed offline; languages and scripts used; avatars; and number of links to other sites. These critical variables influence the use and importance of chat and forum communities for local Central Asians and have critical implications for sources and reliability of information available in real-world communities.

Forum sites usually contain basic statistics on the number of users and have profiles of users, topics, and other information. As chat sites do not usually contain such data, we collected it manually, i.e., we counted the number of users and made our own estimates about the types of users, topics, and other information. We also made notes of special features, if any, that the sites contain. Information on specific procedures and definitions is available in Appendix I. This data thus gives overview information on the technical set-up, demographics, and social dynamics of the chat rooms and forums.

The following sections report the data from these two phases of the study and present evidence on general Internet usage and patterns of chat and forum participation throughout Central Asia to support our argument that online discussions are important for community building (both on- and offline) and as sources of alternative information in repressive information environments. These findings are important for the Central Asian region, and they also have critical implications for sources and reliability of information available in other technologically emerging regions of the world.

**Patterns of General Internet Usage in Central Asia**

With an increase in the availability and use of these various Internet resources, an understanding of who the users are, what motivates them to use these technologies, and what they do online is important. This section presents data about Internet use and information seeking behavior from our 2006 survey of four Central Asian countries.\(^7\)

While the absolute numbers from our survey indicate low levels of Internet penetration in Central Asia, local citizens are increasingly online in all of the regional countries (See Figure 1).\(^8\)

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\(^6\) We conducted participant observations of 3-5 chat and forum sites per country.

\(^7\) Because of repressive government conditions in 2006, our survey does not include Turkmenistan.

\(^8\) Our own survey was not conducted in Turkmenistan. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimates that about 0.7 percent of Turkmenistan’s population uses the Internet. With the death of Turkmenbashy, Turkmenistan’s president from December 1991 to December 2006, some of the...
Such a broad stroke description of Internet users is illustrative, but finer grained demographic information helps to paint a more detailed picture of Internet use in Central Asia. Of our survey respondents, men are more likely to be Internet users, but, as Figure 2 shows, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan the gender breakdowns are very close. While the mean age of survey respondents who use the Internet is under 30, Internet and chat users tend to be young adults. Indeed, 17 percent of our survey respondents who use the Internet and 42 percent of respondents who use chat and forum sites were age 25 or younger. This youth demographic has important ramifications for on- and offline community in the future. This trend in age is also consistent both with global Internet use and reflects the youth bulge in the Central Asia region. Not surprisingly, Internet and chat users in Central Asia are also primarily inhabitants of urban areas (See Figure 3).
With this understanding of who Central Asia’s Internet users are, we now present information about why these individuals use the Internet and what they do online. Despite limited connectivity, people in Central Asia actively learn about and discuss regional developments via the Internet. As our survey results demonstrate, while traditional personal social networks and locally produced television are the most important and trustworthy sources of information, the Internet is increasingly viewed as a reliable source of information on regional and world events and educational and employment opportunities; see Figure 4.
In addition, the Internet also serves as an alternative source of information when traditional local sources are blocked, such as during the March 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan or the May 2005 events in Andijan Uzbekistan. During these events, local government media outlets were not reporting on the protests and government responses within their own countries and information about the events were sparse or not available in the other Central Asian countries. Internet sites, however, were bustling with information, first-hand accounts, images, and video clips of the happenings. As another example, ferghana.ru, a regional Internet news provider, makes available news and forums about the Ferghana Valley, a region extending between the three countries Central Asian countries of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. This source of information is especially critical, as it can be difficult to obtain information about neighboring countries from traditional, local media sources, such as newspapers and television. In an innovative move, ferghana.ru has recently started an initiative to compile a print digest of stories previously available only on the Internet for dissemination in local markets (citation?). As Figure 5 shows, our survey respondents indicated access to otherwise unavailable information as a primary reason for using the Internet to find news.
In addition, a number of the Internet users who responded to our survey indicated that they felt they had a greater understanding of politics as a result of their Internet use (Figure 6). Although this response was not overwhelmingly positive, it is interesting to note that in an environment of repressive authoritarian governments and restricted information, people see the Internet as a viable means to become better informed about the political system.

**Figure 5: Why do you go online to get news and information about politics?; N=74**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Percentage of Internet Users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to information not available elsewhere</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to online information more convenient</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online sources reflect my interests or values</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional news sources don’t provide all the information I want</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6: Do people who use the Internet have a better understanding of politics?; N=289**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Percentage of Internet Users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With a greater understanding of why Central Asians use the Internet, we now present what they actually do online, including a discussion of chat and forum usage. The Internet allows users in Central Asia to communicate through email, chats, and web cam chats with others both in the region and outside the region. In addition to communication, seeking information about employment opportunities and current events and research for work or school are commonly cited as Internet activities among Central Asians. The Internet is also an important form of entertainment, and downloading video and music are popular online activities.

Figure 7. Online Activities; N=338.

As Figure 7 shows, approximately one-third of Internet users in our survey indicate taking part in chat room discussions. Thus it is an important online activity, and the next section on our participant observation of Central Asia chat and forum sites reports greater information on how chat and forum sites are used in the region.

Patterns of Central Asian Chat and Forum Usage

This section reports qualitative data on participant observations of a number of the most popular chat and forum sites focusing on Central Asia in each of the five Central Asian countries. We classified data from the Central Asia chat sites according to general information about the site (domain, administrative and discussion languages,

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9 Much like in the United States, the Internet is becoming a replacement for traditional postal service and is more reliable than regular mail, as it is not subject to tampering.
presence/absence of moderator, rules of participation, etc.), geographic location of participants, discussions providing information exchange that would be repressed offline, dissemination of information and news that would not be domestically available, and demographic data about the age, gender, and other characteristics of chat and forum participants. These variables are important determinants of online community formation and have critical implications for sharing new information in real-world communities.

Although each regional country has unique characteristics, we discovered a number of common features among participants in the chat and forum sites throughout the five countries. In particular, we found a wide geographic distribution of participants from inside and outside the region, supporting our argument that chat and forum participation enhances the sources of information available to the participants and to their offline communities. We also found that the content of the discussion, rather than the domain in which the site is located, is a major factor determining the popularity of the site. We find this especially interesting because we had hypothesized that individuals might find the use of chats and forums in a domain outside of the reach of a repressive government a safer environment in which to engage in public debate. Nevertheless, censorship and self-censorship practices within certain sites are easily observable. In addition, across all countries, Russian or Russian and English are the primary languages for site administration and substantive discussions. Rather than using individual national languages, the preference for Russian and English demonstrates the ties to a broader online community of participants from various geographic locals. Finally, we found that, even when using non-national language in the very global medium of the Internet, Central Asian chat and forum participants create and use avatars and emoticons (nicknames, images, and symbols) that reflect their national or ethnic characteristics. In this way, online communities are imbued with local culture. These findings are discussed in more detail below.

*Geographic Location of Participants*

Several of the chat and forum sites that we observed collect data on the geographic location of the participants. In addition to participants within Central Asia, these sites indicate a large number of users residing outside of the regional countries. As evidence, Figure 8 (below) is a screen shot of two sites’ graphic representation of their participants’ locations and Table 2 shows the geographic distribution of participants on a forum site in Kyrgyzstan. The geographic distribution indicates that, regardless of location, users communicate in a common language—usually Russian—and are interested in similar topics. Central Asian-focused forums thus attract groups of users from varied locations.

Most of the chats and forum sites we observed are targeted toward conversations between people in a local Central Asian country and people temporarily outside of that country or its immigrants. In part, this situation arises because the Internet is important as a communication tool, replacing other traditional means of communication. Despite the high cost of Internet access, in Central Asia chat discussions through the Internet are generally cheaper than international telephone calls and are more easily accessible. In addition, throughout the region, and particularly in Uzbekistan, telephones are used more cautiously than the Internet for fear of government eavesdropping. At the same time, we

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10 In a number of cases, as many as half of active chat or forum participants reside outside of Central Asia.
find that the location of participants determines the type of content in which they are interested. Based on the topics discussed in the various chat sites and postings to forums, participants residing outside of Central Asia are generally searching for information about news and current events in a given regional country. Conversely, people residing in a Central Asian country are often interested in social and political developments outside of their home country, information that is often difficult to find in Central Asia. Thus, local participants and their international counterparts exchange information, expanding the sources of information available in their domestic settings.

Figure 8: Representation of Geographic Distribution of Chat and Forum Users

www.fromuz.com

www.tmchat.ru
Table 1: Countries of Participants in Kyrgyz Forum (by ISP Tracking)

1. France
2. Kyrgyzstan
3. United States
4. Kazakhstan
5. Germany
6. Russian Federation
7. Czech Republic
8. China
9. Turkey
10. Belgium

Source: www.kyrgyzforum.com/index.php

Discussion Content

Contrary to our expectations, we discovered that domain is not a factor determining the popularity of a chat or forum site. Instead, the actual content of the site seems to play the significant role. In other words, chat and forum sites located both inside and outside a given country’s domain attract users at different rates based on the content at the sites, not the domain location. For example, the most popular Kyrgyz site, www.diesel.elcat.kg, is in the Kyrgyz domain, but the next most popular site is in the general domain (www.kg-ordo.net). Likewise, the most active Uzbek chat sites are located in the .uz or .ru domains (narod.uz, choyhona.uz and chilanzar.ru), while the most popular Uzbek forum, www.fromuz.com, was created by immigrants from Uzbekistan and the majority of participants reside in Russia and United States. The most active forum in Kazakhstan (www.kazakh.ru) is located outside the Kazakh domain. Despite these observations, the assumption that people feel more secure to engage in public debate in a chat or forum site outside of the local country domain might be valid on the basis of the observed self-censorship practices discussed below.

Since forum sites are generally oriented toward specific audiences, the conversations also tend to cover specific topics: analytical discussions such as politics within a given Central Asian country, social problems, news, humor and entertainment, search for people, professional topics, and nostalgia about the country of origin. Several of these topics are generally considered areas of discussion that would not be appropriate for public discussion within the Central Asian contexts. Most apparent, in this context, were analytic discussions about religion, politics and society, and news items. Almost all the forums that we observed included direct discussions about politics. In general, chat sites, however, did not focus on political or other controversial topics. Thus forum sites allow participants to exchange information that is generally repressed offline. Indeed, several of the observed forum sites include a note on the main page or in the administrative information that the site is intended as an area for “freedom of expression” (See for example, the Forum of Immigrants of Uzbekistan, www.fromuz.com).

At the same time, however, most of the sites also prohibit postings that include insults or discrimination against religion, race, or nationality, threats, pornography, propaganda of national conflicts, or other messages that violate the laws of the local country. By agreeing to these rules of the chat and forum sites, the users warrant that they will not post messages with obscene, vulgar, sexually-oriented, hateful, threatening, or otherwise illegal content. Moreover, some sites, such as Diesel Forum in Kyrgyzstan (www.diesel.elcat.kg), explicitly state rules against the use of the forum for political or religious propaganda. Thus, the site rules limit the range of conversations, but, in most cases, those limitations do not explicitly prohibit the discussion of political topics. Yet,
within particular chat and forum sites, we observed surprising levels of self-censorship around discussions on politically sensitive topics.

Self-censorship within the forums was clearly identified, but it was harder to monitor in the chat sites because chats are generally non-archived, online conversations. In countries where political themes are very sensitive, e.g., www.kazakh.ru in Kazakhstan and www.forum.chat.uz in Uzbekistan, participants use self-regulation to avoid discussions of political themes, such as elections, presidential candidates, government reforms, criticism of political system, government officials, etc. In these discussions, participants living inside the particular countries do not feel safe to discuss politics, even when the sites are hosted in domains outside of the local country, as users’ IP addresses could be potentially tracked to a specific ISP within the country and a particular user. This situation creates a level of uncertainty about the safety of engaging in open discussions on politically sensitive topics. Indeed, we observed that people living outside the more repressive countries tend to engage in more open discussions on political topics. We also found, however, that discussion of social problems such as poverty and unemployment is less self-censored, even in among participants residing in the more repressive regional countries.

Target and Actual Participants

Many of the chat and forum sites we observed state that they are intended for specific target audiences and track the demographic data of site participants. On both chat and forum sites, target users are generally young people living in Central Asian countries and young emigrants from or people living temporarily outside of Central Asia. Participants in these online communities are generally in their late teens through late 20s. They are generally united in a site through common interest in a specific topic or theme. These themes vary widely and include topics as diverse as ethnic minorities rights within a particular country to tips on studying or living abroad. As these young people make connections to other participants around the globe and gain access to new sources of information, their worldviews and their relationships to their off-line communities shift.

As we classified chat and forum sites, we found the greatest cross-country variation in terms of target audiences and volume of participants. We measured chat and forum site activity by the number of users log-on to the web site at the times of observation and according to the total number of registered users. Kazakhstan’s chat and forum sites have the most obviously diverse populations of users and, as a result, these sites are more specifically designed toward certain target audiences. For example, while sites exist for general public audiences (www.kub.kz and www.kazakh.ru), many other sites designed for specialized groups such as bankers (www.banker.kz), attorneys and legal professionals (http://www.zakon.kz/chat), and library users (www.pushkinlibrary.kz), among others. One possible explanation for the greater degree of specialization in Kazakhstan is the higher level of socioeconomic development in Kazakhstan, which gives the population more access and exposure to ICTs.

In measuring the volume of participants, we were able to record definite numbers for registered users of forum sites and we can also observe the specific volume of participants on a given day. Of course, there are a number of non-registered users who cannot post comments or messages but who can observe discussions and read posted information. On chat sites, however, it is uncommon that they give a number of how
many registered users. Instead, we counted the number of users present at given times of observation. We also returned to these sites one year later to assess the change in user volume and found dramatic increases in the numbers of users of both chat and forum sites throughout the region.

Table 2: Chat or Forum Site with Largest Number of Participants, 2006/2007*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chat or Forum Site</th>
<th>Registered Users 2006/2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.kazakh.ru">http://www.kazakh.ru</a> / <a href="http://bb.ct.kz">http://bb.ct.kz</a> (Kazakhstan)</td>
<td>2,147/38,652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.diesel.elcat.kg">http://www.diesel.elcat.kg</a> (Kyrgyzstan)</td>
<td>11,922/10,829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://forum.dushanbe.ru">http://forum.dushanbe.ru</a> (Tajikistan)</td>
<td>2,398/3,065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.ashgabad.ru/forum">http://www.ashgabad.ru/forum</a> (Turkmenistan)</td>
<td>3,180/8,722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://fromuz.com">http://fromuz.com</a> (Uzbekistan)</td>
<td>16,000/31,325</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These estimates are based on number of users registered on a site at the time of observation in 2006 and 2007.

Language

Russian is the primary language for site administrative and substantive discussion on the chat and forum sites. In a couple of cases, English or both Russian and English were used. The wide use of Russian language enables participants to expand their online communities beyond speakers of their national languages, even while recognizing the uniqueness of their particular countries or ethnic groups. Indeed, despite the common use of Russian across all countries, the forum and chat sites differ in their use of local languages. In Kazakhstan, for example, English is more dominant than Kazakh. In Uzbekistan, however, Uzbek is more commonly as the second language used. In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, site content is posted in the local language but mostly using Cyrillic, rather than Latinized, script. Overall Cyrillic script dominated among all the observed chat and forum sites. Indeed, we found that many of the sites have rules governing the use of Cyrillic script for both Russian and local language postings. For example, chat and forum sites in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have rules stating that, for the convenience of the author and readers, postings in Russian language should only use Cyrillic script. These sites even offer transliteration programs in case the Cyrillic script is not available on an individual’s keyboard. If the rule is violated and postings in Russian language are written using the Latin alphabet, the site moderator deletes the postings. This discussion illustrates how language choice and usage serves to bridge different communities in the virtual space.

Local Characteristics in Avatars and Emoticons

Despite the preference for non-national language, a variety of national- or regionally-inspired avatars and emoticons are noticeably used in Central Asian chat and forum sites. This localization of the global medium varied in practice from simply using nicknames based on real or folklore heroes and celebrities or nicknames with distinct national or regional characteristics, to complex graphic representations and uploaded photos with regional or national icons and images. Instead of drawing on global pop culture, these avatars and emoticons reflect the cultural features of the local countries. As shown below
(see Table 3), even smiley faces take on local features. Thus, the avatars and emoticons used by Central Asian chat and forum participants reflect national and ethnic characteristics and, in this way, imbue online communities with local culture.

Table 3: National Emoticons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Emoticons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Uzbekistan Emoticons" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Kazakhstan Emoticons" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmenstan</td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Turkmenstan Emoticons" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Kyrgyzstan Emoticons" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

Central Asia’s chats and forums have become important alternative sources of information, when local governments repress access to local, regional, and international news and current events. Moreover, online communities consist of individuals who are part of real-world social networks and the information gained through chats and forums is increasingly shared in offline communities. Because youth is the dominant demographic group participating in chat and forum sites, these online exchanges and communities are likely to have important longer-term implications for information seeking and expectations of new and traditional media.

The creation of virtual communities through chats and forums provides a new arena for public discourse in Central Asia. Because Central Asian chat and forum sites target both regional populations and participants in other parts of the world the information and viewpoints exchanged in these online discussions is varied and vast. Russian language, being the most commonly used language in Central Asian forums and chats bridges participants across the regional countries and also participants in a broader geographic locations. Because chat and forum sites are available in many countries of the world, the phenomena discussed in this paper have implications beyond Central Asia to the entire global sphere.

Finally, the exchange of information on chat and forum sites is quickly being replaced by other types of new media, including blogs and instant messaging. Applying the findings from this study of chats and forums to understanding the adoption and adaptation of these new media will have important implications on- and off-line community building, access to and saturation of information, and expectations of future media and ICTs.
Appendix I: Definitions and Data Collection Procedures for Chat and Forum Observations

We used the following definitions and procedures as the basis of our participant observations of the chat and forum sites:

*Stated purpose of the site* was determined through the site name, administrative pages of the site, and other signals for the intended topics of discussion.

*Target Audience* that a particular web site appeals to was determined according to the administrative pages and content of the site, advertisements, and topics of discussion.

*Categories of Users* included information on the gender, age, and location of actual users of the site. This information was gathered from personal profiles available at the sites.

*Number of Actual Users* was captured either from statistical data compiled by a particular site or by manually counting the users at the specific time and date of observation.

*Content of discussion/Topics* discussed in chats and forums were identified as news, analytical discussions, entertainment, search, Q&A, language forums, and clubs. This category also allowed us to explore the discussion of community development and use of chats as alternative sources of information.

*Geographic location* of the participants was based on personal profiles and content of discussion. It measured the development of ties between local Central Asian chat and forum participants and their counterparts around the globe.

*Chat and Forum Activity* was measured by the number of users observed at the web site, the time of visit to the web site, and the total number of registered users.

*Administrative language* corresponded to the administrative part of the site.

*Primary v. other language in chat/forum* was counted by word. These tallies in chat sites were based on the number of words in each language captured during the time of visit to the chat. The “primary language” corresponded to 60 percent or more of the language used, and other languages were used in 40 percent or fewer chat and forum discussions.

Use of *Cyrillic v. Latin script* was determined by counting the frequency of words in Cyrillic versus Latin script. Because Central Asia countries are multilingual with mixed use of Russian, local, and other languages, the language assessment was not based on user demographics but on word counts observed in actual discussions.

*Avatars and Emoticons* of the chat and forum users were observed and defined as: nicknames based on local real or folklore heroes and celebrities, and local, national, or ethnic images, symbols in simple graphic representation (head only v. full body), complex graphic representation, and uploaded photos.
Appendix II: Screenshots of Regional Chat and Forum Sites

Kazakhstan:  www.kazakh.ru

Kyrgyzstan forum:  www.kg-ordo.net
Uzbekistan chat: www.chilanzar.ru

Tajikistan forum: www.tajforum.tj
Tajikistan forum: www.chathona.tj

Turkmenistan forum: www.ashgabat.ru
References


Reymers 2002 in Brown et al. 2005: 63