



# NEW SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONFLICT IN KYRGYZSTAN

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## I. Introduction

From March to June 2010 Kyrgyzstan experienced major political and social conflict. In April President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was overthrown following a violent confrontation with opposition groups that left 86 people dead and many injured. Two months later, ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek groups clashed in the southern city of Osh. The violence quickly escalated and spread across the south of the country. By the time the violence subsided, official sources reported approximately 470 dead, thousands injured, hundreds of thousands displaced, and houses and businesses across the south extensively damaged.<sup>1</sup> In addition to attracting widespread international and regional attention, the events were subject to unprecedented levels of reporting as they were unfolding, thanks in part to the use of a variety of new and social media—mobile phone text messaging, emailing, photo sharing, social networking, video hosting and the like.

The use of new and social media during this period of unrest links Kyrgyzstan to other recent popular protest movements around the world. When thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Moldova in 2009 to protest the country's Communist government, their action was dubbed the Twitter Revolution, reflecting the apparent central role of Twitter.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the role of social media in a series of anti-regime protests—notably the student protests in Tehran of 2009–10 (known as the Green, or Facebook, Revolution), the Red Shirt protests in Thailand of 2010, and the Tunisian Revolution (known as the Jasmine, or WikiLeaks, Revolution) and the Egyptian Revolution of 2010–11—has been seen as central, and even crucial, to a new era of social protest.

This paper aims to explore the role of social media in the political turmoil and violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. In examining Kyrgyzstan, it assesses the

<sup>1</sup> [Kyrgyzstan: The death toll in the June riots reached 403 people], fergana.ru, 5 Oct. 2010, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=15673&mode=snews>>; [Kyrgyzstan: Published by the conclusion of the National Commission of Inquiry on the June events], fergana.ru, 20 Jan. 2011, <<http://www.ferghananews.com/article.php?id=6871>>; and 'June events in the South of Kyrgyzstan left over 20 000 people without jobs—Uktomkhan Abdullaeva', *News Agency 24*, 20 Oct. 2010, <<http://eng.24.kg/community/2010/10/20/14342.html>>. See also section IV below. Note on sources: The nature of new media means that Internet sources are liable to removal or expiry. The citations provided in this paper to social media sources were active during the research and writing of the paper, although some were already unavailable before final publication.

<sup>2</sup> Morozov, E., 'Moldova's Twitter Revolution', *Foreign Policy*, 7 Apr. 2010, <[http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/07/moldovas\\_twitter\\_revolution](http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/07/moldovas_twitter_revolution)>.

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## SUMMARY

● During 2010 Kyrgyzstan experienced two periods of conflict that took the country to the brink of civil war: the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April and the ethnic violence in the south of the country in June. The use of blogs and social network sites as well as mobile and multimedia platforms during the upheaval has led some observers to link developments in Kyrgyzstan to other recent cases of social protest where new media has been prominent. However, these events offer no simple answer to the current social media debate.

The complex and shifting role of new media as a factor in the events in Kyrgyzstan illustrates that the two conflicts were different in important ways and that new media was used differently in each. While new media made significant contributions to these events, it did not drive them and its importance has to be seen alongside the more conventional mobilization techniques and the role of traditional international media—which was often the source of social media reporting.

The events in Kyrgyzstan highlight the use of new media as political tools, but at the same time, point to the importance of a set of enabling conditions—technical, economic, social and political—as defining the ways in which these tools can be used.



***Kyrgyzstan's media has been subject to significant efforts by the government to control the content and direction of reporting***

significance of new and social media to the unrest in the light of the broader debate about the impact of such media on processes of political change. Section II of this paper first provides background information on Kyrgyzstan's media climate, telecommunication infrastructure and user demographics and then summarizes the development of new media in Kyrgyzstan during 2009. Sections III and IV look at two distinct, but interrelated, violent confrontations that broke out in March–April and May–June of 2010, respectively, and examine the role of social media at various stages within the conflicts. Section V briefly looks at new media in the post-conflict period, and section VI offers conclusions.

## II. Telecommunications, media and politics

### **Telecommunications infrastructure and user demographics**

Mass media in Kyrgyzstan has enjoyed relative freedom when compared to other Central Asian countries.<sup>3</sup> After Kyrgyzstan's independence at the end of 1991, a lively civil society, often assisted by international donors, emerged. It largely supported efforts to strengthen democratic principles, including freedom of the press. It is important to note, however, that Kyrgyzstan's media has been subject to significant efforts by the government to control the content and direction of reporting.<sup>4</sup>

The ownership of media by business elites linked to the government and the use of state financing to support newspapers and television, including nominally private media, has made drawing distinctions between private and public media impossible.<sup>5</sup> Such economic influence—together with the government's control over communications licensing and health and safety inspections, which can be used to intimidate or close media, and the capacity to enforce censorship—provides the government with powerful means to shape the information environment in the country.

In these conditions, as early as the turn of the 21st century, people in Kyrgyzstan were looking to the Internet as a means to counter the failings of the mainstream media in providing the population with information and analysis.<sup>6</sup> But access to new forms of electronic media came only

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, 'traditional' or 'conventional' media refers to established communication mediums such as print newspaper as well as broadcast radio and television, which may also be referred to as 'electronic media' reflecting local usage. 'New' media refers both to wired (fixed) and wireless (mobile) digital telecommunication technologies, namely the Internet, and its related devices (e.g. feature phones and smartphones, desktop and laptop computers) and applications. Terms like 'mass', 'mainstream', 'independent', 'private', 'citizen' and 'state-run' refer, in part, to how the media content is generated. Social media is a facet of new media, referring in large part to how it is used; its hallmark is the networked exchange of both user- and third-party-generated content—as opposed to one-way consumption.

<sup>4</sup> For a description of the evolution of Kyrgyzstan's media from the liberal environment of the early 1990s to far greater control by the state authorities by 2001 see Kulikova, S. V. and Ibraeva, G., 'History', *Development and Current Structures of Mass Media in Independent Kyrgyzstan* (Cimera: Geneva, 2001), section 3.

<sup>5</sup> On the concentration of media ownership in Kyrgyzstan through the creation of media holding groups see Kulikova and Ibraeva (note 4), section 3.1.4.

<sup>6</sup> Toktogulova, E., 'Mass media in Kyrgyzstan has its virtual future', Central-Asian-Media-Electronic-List (CAMEL), CIMERA, no. 16 (June 2001), <<http://www.cimera.org/files/camel/en/c16e-toktogulova.pdf>>.



slowly to Kyrgyzstan. A survey conducted in 2009 indicated that there were 760 664 Internet users in the country—in an overall population of over 5 million.<sup>7</sup> Of the total number of Internet users, 156 000, or 20.5 per cent, were mobile Internet users (i.e. accessing the Internet from a mobile device). Mobile phone use was widespread in the country—the International Telecommunication Union cites 92 per cent of the Kyrgyzstan’s population as having a mobile phone subscription and 4.14 per cent (c. 220 836 people) as having mobile broadband, nearly 41 per cent more than in 2009.<sup>8</sup>

Internet usage in 2009 was skewed heavily towards younger generations: 40 per cent of users were aged 10–20 years old, 35 per cent were 20–30 years old and 16 per cent were 30–40 years old. At the time of the survey, Kyrgyzstan had yet to roll out any major e-government initiatives—reflecting the government’s unfamiliarity with the emerging social power of the Internet—which might have provided an impetus for its citizens to get online.

Internet usage was, and continues to be, a predominantly urban phenomenon. It is primarily concentrated in the capital, Bishkek, which accounts for one-sixth of the country’s population but 77 per cent of its Internet users, who are mostly connected through home, work or smart phones as there are few Internet cafes.

High-speed, wired Internet was available in the 30 largest urban centres (wherein live about 30 per cent of the population), but it was not accessible from all homes. Elsewhere in the country access was far more rare. Osh, the second largest city in the country, and the Osh region, located in the south of Kyrgyzstan, had 10 per cent of Internet users, while the Jalalabad region, also in the south, and the Chuy region, in the north, each had 4 per cent of users. The rest of Kyrgyzstan, with its largely rural character, had very low numbers of users.

### *Access to new forms of electronic media came only slowly to Kyrgyzstan*

High-speed Internet access increased substantially with the 2009 roll-out of a hybrid mobile phone network structure, supporting a second generation (2G) wireless (GPRS) network to most of the country and a 3G (CDMA) network to the larger cities.<sup>9</sup> Thus, with the development of mobile Internet in Kyrgyzstan, mobile phones increasingly became a source of information.<sup>10</sup> However, the practice of charging by downloaded volume (from \$7 to \$30 per gigabyte) made access expensive at the time that the conflicts in 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Promotank HQA, *Research of Internet Audience in Kyrgyzstan*, Report commissioned by the Civic Initiative for Internet Policy (CIIP) (CIIP: Bishkek, 2009), <<http://www.gipi.kg/archives/53>>.

<sup>8</sup> International Telecommunication Union, <<http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/icteye/DisplayCountry.aspx?code=KYR>>.

<sup>9</sup> Lelik, A., Baki, A. and Nurmanbetova, Z., ‘3G connection will appear in Kyrgyzstan before the end of 2010’, Kloop Media, n.d., <<http://kloop.info/2010/10/31/3g-connection-will-appear-in-kyrgyzstan-before-the-end-of-2010/>>. 2G and 3G denote the second and third generation technologies used in wireless, digital communications. 2G is primarily limited to voice and SMS text messaging, whereas 3G application services can include, in addition to voice SMS messaging, mobile Internet access, video calls and mobile TV. According to TeleGeography’s GlobalComms Database, Kyrgyzstan’s GSM firms are Sky Mobile (Beeline), BiMoCom (Megacom) and Nur Telecom (O!); its CDMA-based companies Aktel (Fonex) and SoTel (Nexi); and its TDMA network operator is Katel. ‘Mobile subscribers top 4.9 million, MoTC says (Kyrgyzstan)’, ICT Statistics Newslog, International Telecommunication Union, 8 Feb. 2011, <<http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/newslog/Mobile+Subscribers+Top+49+Million+MoTC+Says+Kyrgyzstan.aspx>>.

<sup>10</sup> Apart from the social networking site namba.kg, there were very few sites formatted for smart phones with Kyrgyzstan-ccTLDs during 2010. With the Russian language dominant among Kyrgyzstan’s websites, there were fewer Kyrgyz-language sites with Kyrgyzstan-ccTLDs.



Due to the sizable and growing Russian-language Internet world, Internet users in Kyrgyzstan have traditionally experienced the Internet through a Russian lens (notably, most of the sites mentioned below use the Russian language). However, a small but growing movement to service Kyrgyz speakers was developing. With approximately one '.kg' country-code top-level domain (ccTLD) per thousand inhabitants, Kyrgyzstan ranks near the bottom of the world's countries in terms of its per capita ccTLD name registrations.<sup>11</sup>

Bishkek users received their connectivity through neighbouring Kazakhstan. As a result Kyrgyzstan's users operated under Kazakhstan's Internet censorship regime, which blocked access to 2 of the 10 top blogging platforms, LiveJournal and Google's Blogspot/Blogger, from 2008.<sup>12</sup>

### **Politics, protest and the social media leading up to the conflicts of 2010**

From the late 1990s, there was almost constant pressure from the governments of the first two post-Soviet presidents, Askar Akayev (1990–2005) and Kurmanbek Bakiyev (2005–10), to restrict the media, with repressive measures spiking during periods of turmoil.<sup>13</sup> However, given the slow technological development and Internet penetration in the country, the traditional media was the focus of government restrictions over the past decade. As new and social media in Kyrgyzstan started to develop more actively, some parts of it quickly acquired political functions, raising questions about how to control this new source of information.<sup>14</sup>

The Tulip Revolution of 2005, which ousted President Akayev and his government, was the first political success story of new media in Kyrgyzstan, giving a strong boost to the development of new media in the country. As the confrontation between the Akayev regime and the opposition escalated in March 2005, the government started to block access to various websites, both local and foreign, that covered the activities of opposition parties or that were seen as promoting discontent. It was at this moment that Elena Skochilo, a journalist and blogger from Bishkek, began to cover the events in Bishkek with up-to-date and reliable information on her LiveJournal-based blog based at, although social media did not play a role in the events themselves.<sup>15</sup> On 24 March, opposition parties organized mass rallies in Bishkek that ended with the White House (the Kyrgyz's centre of government) being stormed, Akayev's flight from the country and the subsequent election of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev.

From this point, new media in Kyrgyzstan started to develop more quickly with an expansion of infrastructure, applications and an accelerating usage. International organizations and donors—notably the Open Society Institute

<sup>11</sup> ccTLDs are the two-letter top-level domains especially designated for a particular country or autonomous territory to use to service their community (e.g. .uk).

<sup>12</sup> Adam, 'LiveJournal blocked in Kazakhstan', 20 Oct. 2010, <<http://www.neweurasia.net/cross-regional-and-blogsphere/livejournal-blocked-in-kazakhstan/>>.

<sup>13</sup> 'Media controversy helps spur protests in Kyrgyzstan', EurasiaNet.org, 21 Feb. 2005, <<http://www.EurasiaNet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/eav022205.shtml>>; and Freedman, E., 'When a democratic revolution isn't democratic or revolutionary: press restraints and press freedoms after Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution', *Journalism*, vol. 10, no. 6 (Dec. 2009), pp. 843–61.

<sup>14</sup> Online chat services were available in Kyrgyzstan from the late 1990s, e.g. Elcat, but these were largely used by small groups focusing on non-political issues.

<sup>15</sup> See her entry for 25 Mar. 2005 on LiveJournal, <<http://morrirre.livejournal.com/2005/03/24/>>.



and Transitions Online—funded various projects on developing citizen journalism and new media in Kyrgyzstan. One of the earliest blogging projects funded by donors was the Central Asian blogging network (neweurasia.net), which covered all five Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—and involved bloggers from both inside and outside the country. Uniquely, from 2006 neweurasia.net hosted blogs in English, together with Russian and other local languages.<sup>16</sup>

Kloop Media (kloop.kg), another prominent new media project, launched in 2007 with the stated mission to train young journalists in how to use new media tools to cover the events happening in their country and to create a free blogging platform. By the end of 2010 Kloop Media was reported to have about 2500 blogs, of which about 250 were active and regularly updated.<sup>17</sup>

Previously, the microblogging and social networking site Twitter had a relatively small profile in Kyrgyzstan, but from the beginning of 2010 its profile began to quickly rise, a development accelerated by the uprisings during the year.<sup>18</sup> Facebook too had little penetration of the market in Kyrgyzstan prior to 2010, reflecting the weakness of the site in the countries of the former Soviet Union and the presence of popular local alternatives, such as V Kontakte.<sup>19</sup>

Diesel Forum—an administrator-moderated, member-based online news discussion forum—was another new media tool that had a great impact on Kyrgyzstani Internet users. In 2010 it was the most visited and commented on website in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>20</sup> Diesel Forum claimed to have 60 000 accounts and on average 2500 unique visits per day.<sup>21</sup>

By 2010, a variety of local video hosting sites had also developed. Internet service providers (ISPs) in Kyrgyzstan charged less for internal Internet traffic (i.e. from servers based in Kyrgyzstan) than external sources (i.e. from servers outside of the country). The average price ISPs charged for 1 megabyte (MB) of internal traffic was 0.01 cents, whereas external traffic was 0.03 cents per 1 MB. While some ISPs also offered unlimited traffic tariffs (256 kilobytes/sec for \$50/month), not many people could afford them. This discouraged the use of externally based video services like YouTube.com and RuTube.com. As internal traffic was cheap, local video services (e.g. blive.kg, video.namba.kg and bulbul.kg), whose servers were based in Kyrgyzstan, became popular.

Despite these developments, mobile social media was still in its infancy in early 2010. Nevertheless, the fast changing new and social media environment was already providing new opportunities for the sharing of information as political unrest gathered force in early 2010.

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<sup>16</sup> The history of the neweurasia.net blogging platform initiative is available at <<http://www.neweurasia.net/history/>>.

<sup>17</sup> Iskender, B., President of Kloop Media, Interview with Tolkun Umaraliev, 10 Dec. 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Twitter could not be easily used on mobile phones until Aug. 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Bradshaw, T. and Gelles, D., 'Facebook targets China and Russia', *Financial Times*, 24 June 2010; and Trubilova, K., 'Why Facebook won't beat Russia's V Kontakte?', <<http://katyatrubilova.wordpress.com/2010/07/01/why-facebook-won%E2%80%99t-beat-russia%E2%80%99s-vkontakte/>>.

<sup>20</sup> Makarov, S., Head of the New Media Institute (Kyrgyzstan), Interview with Tolkun Umaraliev, 15 Jan. 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Diesel Forum, <<http://diesel.elcat.kg/index.php?showtopic=617547>> (in Russian).





### III. Political conflict breaks out in Bishkek

By March of 2010 popular disaffection with President Bakiyev's regime was growing stronger and being successfully channelled through the better-organized opposition. Resentments about widespread corruption, notably involving the president's family and allies, were magnified by a deteriorating socio-economic situation exemplified by ongoing poverty, rising unemployment, skyrocketing utility prices, privatization of the country's energy resources and communication institutions (widely viewed as enriching the ruling elite), and a widening gap between different sectors of society.

The online community began to focus on the Bakiyev regime after Russian media alleged that the president's family was involved in major corruption, notably with Eugene Gourevich, a Russian businessman. Although these allegations were easily accessible on the Internet, the story was not covered by news agencies in Kyrgyzstan, which were under the influence of the Bakiyev regime.<sup>22</sup> The small online new and social media community picked up the story and played a central role in its wide dissemination. The information about the alleged links to Gourevich caused considerable reaction among Kyrgyzstan's Internet users when it first appeared on the Diesel Forum. Bakiyev's government is reported to have warned the Diesel administration, and the company began to close and to delete discussion threads on the topic.<sup>23</sup> The discussion then migrated to Twitter, blogs and private Skype chats.

*On 10 March Twitter users started to use the hashtag #freekg to disseminate information on the demonstrations*

The opportunity to discuss such issues, largely blocked in the local traditional media, seems to have helped galvanize a like minded online community, which began to share information and to discuss the wider political situation developing in the country. At this point, Twitter—which was and continues to be used primarily as a means to communicate about personal matters—began to acquire a political role.

With the traditional media not reporting on issues such as government corruption, the openness of new media to such information helped promote a sense among the online community that they were engaged in providing 'facts' as opposed to the disinformation of the official channels. In fact, reporting through new and social media has often rested on the retransmission of unsubstantiated stories and rumours, the truth of which can be hard to verify.

#### **March 2010**

On 10 March Twitter users reporting on the ongoing protests in Naryn—located in the north of the country and one of the poorest cities of Kyrgyzstan—started to use the hashtag #freekg to disseminate information on the demonstrations.<sup>24</sup> The local Twitter user @jazmairam2010kg provided

<sup>22</sup> Contributions to topic under discussion about Eugene Gourevich from different online sources, Freekg.net, <<http://forum.freekg.net/index.php?topic=161.0>> (in Russian).

<sup>23</sup> Discussion on ways in which Eugene Gourevich laundered money of international mafia in Kyrgyzstan, Diesel Forum, <<http://diesel.elcat.kg/index.php?showtopic=3644596>>.

<sup>24</sup> A hashtag is a searchable naming convention to track Twitter discussion topics in real time. Due to the archive problem of Twitter, it is impossible to access the first Tweet of #freekg. However,



what were believed to be the most complete and accurate accounts of what was happening, while the traditional media stayed silent. From this point on, Twitter became a key source to track the latest developments in Kyrgyzstan, and its users began to promote it as the best information source for users of other online services. The hashtag quickly gained popularity, and in April it became an important means to provide information to journalists and the wider population. Conversely, the mainstream media was almost fully controlled by the Bakiyev regime and was silent about the mass protests in Naryn.<sup>25</sup>

As the rallies in the north strengthened, the government sought to extend its media control to the Internet. To prevent coverage of the protests, Kyrgyz-Telecom, the government-run telecom monopoly, started to block access to the websites of independent news agencies and radio.<sup>26</sup> A few opposition newspapers covered the events in Naryn, but their circulations were small. A new law was also being prepared according to which Internet media would have been required to register with the state as traditional press.<sup>27</sup>

Diesel Forum, under pressure from the government, continued to delete the threads on controversial topics but was unable to stop all discussion. To bypass Internet censorship, advanced users started to disseminate information on proxy websites and by other means. Articles from blocked sites, mostly containing information about the Gourevich case and the rallies in Naryn, were quickly reposted in blogs then circulated through social network links.

During March, Twitter, Moi Mir (a Russian-language social networking site created by the Russian-based company mail.ru), social networks and online forums became key places to get information about anti-Bakiyev protests happening in the country. Thus, the censorship policies of the Bakiyev regime reinforced the opposition's focus on new media to track developments. However, it was phones, especially mobile phones—which provided mobility, SMS capacity, ease of use, high levels of usage in society, a degree of anonymity and, for a small minority, Internet access—that served as the key technology for the opposition as it set about organizing protests and coordinating its supporters.

As the confrontation escalated, the government—in an unprecedented move against the country's media—partially blocked leading Russian TV channels and locally produced channels edited their news shows, which

the links <<http://twitpic.com/1dnfou>> and <<https://twitter.com/baisalov/status/11746111593>> show that the hashtag was in use at the beginning of Apr. 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Abdrakhmanova, A., 'Kyrgyz Government faces down utilities protests', Institute of War and Peace Reporting, 2 Apr. 2010, <<http://iwpr.net/report-news/kyrgyz-government-faces-down-utilities-protests>>.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. news agencies the state sought to shut down were [White Sail], <<http://www.parusk.g>>; [CentrAsia], <<http://www.centrasia.ru>>, Fergana.ru, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/>> and Asattyk (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Kyrgyz Service), <<http://www.azattyk.kg>>. For an example of a thread that discusses the blockade of independent news websites reporting about the Mar. 2010 rallies in Naryn see Diesel Forum, [ISPs have blocked access to 'Fergana.Ru' and some other sites, ceased broadcasting Radio Azattyk in Bishkek], <<http://diesel.elcat.kg/index.php?showtopic=3547980>> (in Russian). Following the political upheavals of 2010, media censorship, especially in respect to the Internet, has continued to be a key issue in Kyrgyzstan, with efforts to block independent news sites. See CentrAsia, [Political failure: why Kyrgyzstan wants to close the Internet publication 'Fergana', 'CentrAsia', 'White Sail'], 12 June 2011, <<http://www.parusk.info/2011/06/12/45301>>.

<sup>27</sup> International Media Support (IMS), *The Media in Kyrgyzstan: A Window of Opportunity* (IMS: Copenhagen, June 2010), p. 19.



relied on Russian material, to remove coverage of political events in Kyrgyzstan. However, the direct access many people in Kyrgyzstan have to Russian news programmes via satellite and cable services meant that unedited news shows were quickly uploaded to local video hosters in Kyrgyzstan, such as blive.kg. Discussion of the reports was then taken up on Twitter and in social networks.

The opposition, which had been weak for several years, was quick to take advantage of the Naryn demonstrations and organized several rallies protesting against the government. One such rally, consisting of 1500 to 3000 people, featured speakers challenging the president on issues such as corruption, illegal privatization, high utility prices, the persecution of the opposition and journalists, and closures of independent print publications, radio and television stations.<sup>28</sup>

### April 2010

On 1 April authorities closed Stan TV, the only Internet TV outlet in Kyrgyzstan, for the alleged use of illegal software.<sup>29</sup> This incident was widely covered by new and social media users after an amateur video of the raid on Stan TV's office appeared on the Internet.<sup>30</sup> The government continued its efforts to prevent coverage of the situation, blocking Diesel Forum users and some international websites reporting on the events.<sup>31</sup> The government's efforts to constrain the remaining free media in the country prompted criticism from the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, who was visiting at the time and stated that 'all human rights must be protected. That includes free speech and freedom of the media'.<sup>32</sup> This was followed a couple of days later by Kyrgyzstani Internet users discussing Ban's comments and the protests by human rights activists in front of the UN House in Bishkek. Several human rights activists tweeted news from the protests. Again, the traditional media neglected the event.

The demonstrations spread to Talas, a small town in the north west of the county. On 2 April Twitter became an important source of information about protests in the Talas region.<sup>33</sup> After the events in Talas, the second political topic attracting the attention of Internet users was an investigation by a citizen journalist, who had tracked the involvement of Maksim Bakiyev, President Bakiyev son, in the large-scale privatization of the country's energy and telecommunications companies. The results of the investigation were published on Diesel Forum but were soon removed by its administration.

<sup>28</sup> Murzakulova, A., 'Opposing *Kurultais* held in Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, 31 Mar. 2010, <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5294>>.

<sup>29</sup> International Media Support (note 27), p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> Amateur video of the closure of Stan TV by representative of State Financial Police, uploaded 1 Apr. 2010, <<http://video.namba.kg/watch.php?id=57068>>.

<sup>31</sup> 'Kyrgyzstan: protesters storm government building in Talas', EurasiaNet.org, 5 Apr. 2010, <<http://www.EurasiaNet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/eav040610.shtml>>.

<sup>32</sup> Trilling, D., 'Kyrgyzstan: UN Head chides Bakiyev as more media outlets blocked', EurasiaNet.org, 4 Apr. 2010, <<http://www.EurasiaNet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/eav040510.shtml>>.

<sup>33</sup> Compilation of Twitter messages reporting on the political environment in Talas, [Who knows what's happening in Talas?], Diesel Forum, 2 Apr. 2010, <<http://diesel.elcat.kg/index.php?showtopic=3716192>> (in Russian).





From 4–5 April the main topic discussed on Twitter and Diesel Forum by Kyrgyzstani Internet users was the preparation of the opposition for the forthcoming protests across the country. This discussion reached its climax by midday on 6 April, when protesters began to clash with law enforcement troops, and about 600–800 people stormed the Talas regional administration building.<sup>34</sup> They took the regional governor hostage and declared a ‘people’s government’ in the region. Contacting their friends and families in Talas via mobile phones, Twitter Internet users in Bishkek relayed live coverage of these events.

The Minister of the Interior, Moldomusa Kongantiev, was sent to Talas to restore order, but he was seized, severely beaten by angry demonstrators and forced to address the crowd. Video of the episode was uploaded to numerous Kyrgyzstani video hosters and quickly generated thousands of views and comments.

The conventional media was widely perceived as failing to report the events in Talas. Representatives of the government made several statements via local TV channels informing the population that the town was under control and that the demonstrations in Talas had been calmed down. The picture presented on social media offered a different perspective, with videos, photos and Tweets highlighting the increasing strength of the demonstrations and the inability of the government to control the situation. In an attempt to stop the demonstrations in Talas, security forces arrested almost all of the prominent opposition figures during the night of 6 April. However, this failed to quell the demonstrations, and rallies quickly spread to other regions of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>35</sup>

Twitter, together with blogs and video hosters, became the main sources for multimedia content from protests around the country.<sup>36</sup> It was the online community that initially reported the detention and later release of opposition leaders, clashes with the police and the beating of the Interior Minister by protesters. Twitter user Bekkul Jekshenkulov, son of the opposition leader Alikbek Jekshenkulov, was one of the active reporters on Twitter during these days—together with several others, notably Kloop bloggers. He was the first to report the arrests of opposition leaders on 6 April. That night, blogs, forums and social networks were the sole source of information about the detention of the opposition leaders.<sup>37</sup> After the government was able to close Diesel Forum, #freekg became the easiest and most common way to obtain direct, first-hand information and served as a hub for links to other sources reporting about the events.

*It was mobile phones that served as the key technology for the opposition as it set about organizing protests and coordinating its supporters*

<sup>34</sup> Twitter messages reporting about the protests in Talas city on 6 Apr. 2010 <<http://bit.ly/h4m5V5>>; and ‘Kyrgyzstan: protesters storm government building in Talas’ (note 31).

<sup>35</sup> ‘Kyrgyzstan: protesters storm government building in Talas’ (note 31).

<sup>36</sup> Picture of burning billboard with image of Kurmanbek Bakiyev from protests in Talas, TwitPic, uploaded 6 Apr. 2010, <<http://twitpic.com/1dnfou>>; Slide show of pictures from protests in Talas on 6 Apr. 2010, Kloop Media, <<http://kloop.kg/blog/2010/04/06/srochno-v-talase-zaxvacheno-zdanie-oblastnoj-administracii/>>; and One of the first amateur videos of the angry crowd beating the Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongantiev during the protests in Talas in 6 Apr. 2010, blive.kg, <<http://www.blive.kg/video:28211/>>.

<sup>37</sup> Arrest of then opposition leader Almazbek Atambayev by security services on night of 6 Apr. 2010, uploaded 7 Apr. 2010, <<http://video.namba.kg/watch.php?id=62685>>.



On April 6 Kyrgyz Twitter user @baisalov, Edil Baisalov—a prominent member of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) and noted LiveJournal blogger—began to use #freekg. Baisalov was close to the leader of the SDPK, Roza Otunbayeva, and he took the post of chief of staff when she became the acting president of Kyrgyzstan after the fall of Bakiyev. This marked the point at which political leaders of the opposition, not simply ordinary citizens and activists, began to use social media to organize opposition to the Bakiyev regime.

With a variety of organizational and media tools available—both traditional and new—representatives from the opposition parties together with local populations in the regions organized rallies outside the administration buildings in the cities of Tokmak, Naryn, Batken, Osh, Jalalabad, Karakol and Kara-Balta and were able to quickly spread news of their activities across the country and internationally. The governors of nearly all the regions voluntarily resigned, and popular governors were elected. The situation in Bishkek also began to change.

### **The fall of Bakiyev**

Opposition parties planned to hold a demonstration in front of the SDPK headquarters in Bishkek on 7 April. Police moved in to prevent the meeting and to disperse the demonstrators. Using stun grenades and tear gas, police began to drive the crowd away from the headquarters. The police actions, however, only angered the crowd, which greatly outnumbered the police. Protesters fought back and reportedly seized control of two armoured vehicles and numerous automatic weapons. Enraged crowds, estimated at up to 10 000 people, confronted the police across the city, who fired rounds of live ammunition.<sup>38</sup> Several snipers were placed on the roofs of key buildings, including the White House. The protesters used weapons and shields taken from police and firearms—such as hunting rifles—they had brought with them. Eventually the protesters succeeded in breaking into the White House. A state of emergency and a 10 pm–6 am curfew were declared. That night President Bakiyev fled the capital to his family house in the Jalalabad region, where he spent his last days in Kyrgyzstan before fleeing into exile in Belarus. The opposition leaders were released and formed the Provisional Government, headed by Roza Otunbayeva—of the SDPK, who became interim president.<sup>39</sup> By the day's end, 86 demonstrators had been killed, mainly by snipers, and hundreds injured.

Mass media outlets, including state television and Russian-language channels, were off the air during much of 7 April, and Internet access was limited

<sup>38</sup> 'Kyrgyzstan: government headquarters under attack', EurasiaNet.org, 7 Apr. 2010, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav040710c.shtml>>.

<sup>39</sup> The official Twitter account of Roza Otunbayeva, which was created in Mar. 2010, relayed first-hand information during the fast-moving events but was really to become significant only once she became interim president. Otunbayeva's Twitter account mentions #freekg for the first time on 7 Apr. 2010. Reflecting the importance of new media for the opposition, Otunbayeva uploaded a photo of the resignation letter of Kurmanbek Bakiyev to her Twitter account on 16 Apr. See Otunbayeva, R., President of Kyrgyzstan, Official Twitter account, <<http://twitter.com/otunbayeva>>; Otunbayeva, R., First use of #freekg, Twitter, 7 Apr. 2010, <<https://twitter.com/#!/otunbayeva/status/11746252591>>; and Otunbayeva, R., First picture of the resignation letter of Kurmanbek Bakiyev, TwitPic, 16 Apr. 2010, <<http://twitpic.com/1fyb5w>>.



and sporadic, creating ‘an information vacuum inside the country’.<sup>40</sup> In this context, social media applications, especially those used on mobile devices, like Twitter and online forums, played a significant role in informing people about the events as they unfolded in Bishkek, even while the government’s efforts to limit access to the Internet (which never achieved complete success) meant connections were difficult. Even as censors sought to close threads, Diesel Forum continued to host debates and discussions and provide a platform for photos and videos uploaded by its users. Hundreds of Tweets were produced under #freekg every minute, and with Twitter being based outside Kyrgyzstan, it was not subject to the local censors and soon eclipsed Diesel in terms of the numbers of persons posting messages on the fast-moving events.

As order broke down in Bishkek on the evening of 7 April, social media contributed to the organization of citizens’ groups to prevent looting. From the evening of 7 April, Diesel Forum, Facebook and Twitter were used to help organize citizens’ protection groups.<sup>41</sup> Organizers of the groups report that the social media sites helped bring together more than 1000 volunteers to join patrols in the city, with mobile phones serving as the principal means to organize and coordinate the groups.<sup>42</sup>

Conventional media re-opened during the night of 7 April. Representatives of opposition parties, with the help of demonstrators, attacked and seized the headquarters of the National TV and Radio Corporation, which had the widest geographic coverage in the country. Despite the damage suffered to the station during the struggle, journalists were able to quickly organize live interviews with the opposition leaders about the events unfolding in the city. The websites of independent news agencies were also unblocked.

During the uncertain and fast moving events of March and April, new media demonstrated a clear edge over many parts of the local traditional media, although international media, notably Azattyk (the Kyrgyz service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), was generally at the forefront of reporting. New media was able to provide up-to-the-minute and uncensored information—although this was often simply relaying the reports of international media—when the traditional local media was unable to follow events because of government control and an inability to respond effectively to the quickly changing environment.

On occasion, new media was able to provide original reporting. For example, Internet forums and Twitter provided the first reports of the gathering of large numbers of people in the suburbs of Bishkek on the morning of the 7 April. Bloggers, Twitter users and members of online forums covered all aspects of the confrontations between the protesters and riot police, the casualties and the seizure of the White House.<sup>43</sup> Twitter users were the first to report the presence of snipers on the roof of the White House, the seizure

*Twitter, together with blogs and video hosters, became the main sources for multimedia content from protests around the country*

<sup>40</sup> ‘Kyrgyzstan: Bishkek consumed by violence amid power vacuum’, EurasiaNet.org, 7 Apr. 2010, <[http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav040710\\_replace.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav040710_replace.shtml)>.

<sup>41</sup> Thread listing emergency phone numbers in case of looting in Bishkek, Diesel Forum, <<http://diesel.elcat.kg/index.php?showtopic=3747473>>.

<sup>42</sup> Interviews with volunteers using social media by Tolkun Umaraliev, Bishkek, Dec. 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Examples of Twitter messages reporting on clashes between protesters and riot police, casualties and the seizure of the White House, 7 Apr. 2010, <<http://bit.ly/eBdKEG>>.



of the Prosecutor General's Office and the Headquarters of the National TV and Radio Company, and the resignation of Daniyar Usenov, Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>44</sup>

Yet despite the important contribution of new and social media—notably in terms of reporting directly on some key events, linking groups of like minded persons in opposition to Bakiyev, and helping to increase a sense of anger with the regime through posting images of repression and violence—its main function was essentially as a means to broadly and quickly circulate information obtained from traditional media outlets. In this way, the role of new media in the overthrow of Bakiyev was to enlarge the existing information space by spreading information to a wider audience, rather than to provide something distinct from conventional media.

Some have noted that there were very few credible first-hand witnesses of the protests who used social media. The overwhelming majority of Tweets were the retransmission of information from and links to traditional media sources by individuals in the crowds who sympathized with change.<sup>45</sup>

#### IV. Ethnic conflict breaks out in Jalalabad

Following the shift of power in the capital and the flight of Bakiyev to Jalalabad, the country's political centre of focus moved to the south. After 7 April 2010 almost all regional governors resigned and were replaced. In the weeks that followed, the pro-Bakiyev forces regrouped—even though Bakiyev himself had fled the country by then—and sought to re-establish their former position.

##### May 2010

In May, Southern supporters of Bakiyev initiated a series of actions designed to regain political control.<sup>46</sup> Faced with the deteriorating situation, the Provisional Government called upon Kadyrjan Batyrov, the leader of the local ethnic Uzbek movement (Rodina), to join with it to challenge the Bakiyev supporters. On 14 May, groups supporting the Provisional Government and members of Rodina expelled the Bakiyev supporters by force from government buildings and restored the former governor to office. They then proceeded to Bakiyev's family house nearby, which was set on fire.<sup>47</sup> Ethnic Kyrgyz apparently believed that it was Kadyrjan Batyrov and his supporters that had set fire to the compound. This action was strongly condemned at rallies of ethnic Kyrgyz across the south.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> @baisalov, re-Tweet of message from @bagishbekov (Sardar Bagyshbekov, human rights activist) reporting snipers shooting from the roof of the White House, Twitter, 7 Apr. 2010 <<http://twitter.com/baisalov/status/11746111593>>; @Jackshencool, Message reporting the seizure of the Prosecutor General's Office, Twitter, 7 Apr. 2010, <<http://twitter.com/Jackshencool/status/11747445118>>; and @otunbayeva, Message reporting prime minister Daniyar Usenov's dissolving the Parliament, 7 Apr. 2010, <<http://twitter.com/otunbayeva/status/11767051373>>.

<sup>45</sup> Marat, E., Personal correspondence with author, May 2011.

<sup>46</sup> 'Bakiyev loyalists seize Kyrgyzstan regional offices', BBC News, 13 May 2010, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8679258.stm>>.

<sup>47</sup> Khamidov, A., 'Provisional Government grappling with simmering ethnic tension in Kyrgyzstan', eurasianet.com, 25 May 2010, <<http://www.EurasiaNet.org/node/61153>>.

<sup>48</sup> Trilling, D., 'Ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan presents new test for Provisional Government', EurasiaNet.org, 19 May 2010, <<http://www.EurasiaNet.org/node/61098>>.



On 19 May a large crowd of mostly young ethnic Kyrgyz supporters of Bakiyev gathered at the horseracing track outside Jalalabad. They were alarmed and angered by what many feared was a political awakening of the Uzbek community and the crowd determined to set about capturing and judging Batyrov. Later the same day, a group moved from the racetrack towards the regional administration building and then to Batyrov's People's Friendship University. The crowd became involved in fighting with groups of ethnic Uzbeks, which left 2 dead and 71 injured and led to the Provisional Government's declaration of a state of emergency in the south.

*The role of new media was to enlarge the existing information space*

Following the clashes in Jalalabad, many of the Kyrgyz-language newspapers—particularly *Forum*, *Alibi*, and *Kyrgyz Tuusu*—began publishing nationally biased articles, which openly divided the society into 'us—Kyrgyz' and 'them—Uzbek'.<sup>49</sup> Most of these are sponsored by politicians and so usually represented the sponsors' points of view (e.g. *Forum* is backed by the SDPK). In May–June 2010 Kyrgyz-language newspapers were essentially read by ethnic Kyrgyz, and the articles attracted little broader attention. The Provisional Government did not respond to this growing ethno-nationalism or to the deteriorating inter-ethnic situation in the south in late May and early June.<sup>50</sup> Only after the June events, when a special committee was organized by the government to analyse the media content, were such newspapers criticized. Following the violence, an online project, *gezitter.kg*, was launched to provide Russian-language translations of Kyrgyz-language press. Since the project was launched, many Facebook users have begun to link to and discuss the controversial articles. From 22 February 2011 the Kyrgyz state telecoms provider began to block the site for users in Kyrgyzstan.

There was some new media activity surrounding the events: Internet users actively commented on the information about the developments in Jalalabad on 19 May, particularly videos that had been posted and circulated of the crowd attempting to break into the university and of an ethnic Uzbek mother crying over her dead son's body.<sup>51</sup> After the state of emergency was declared in the region, users of Twitter and other social networking websites started to discuss the necessity of an intervention by a third party to restore stability.<sup>52</sup>

A new dynamic in social media became evident in the limited new media coverage related to the May events: the increasing online expression of inter-ethnic polarization. Nationalistic and provocative messages started appearing in online forums and Twitter; comments on the videos posted about the violence around the University were diverse, but mostly nationalistic—with

<sup>49</sup> 'Özüm bek degen özbekterdi Manastyn tukumdaryna koysokpu?' [Should we leave these over-lording Uzbeks to the inheritors of Manas], *Alibi*, 8 June 2010, no. 31 (096). Manastyn, or Manas, is a Kyrgyz epic hero from oral folklore.

<sup>50</sup> Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission (KIC), *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry into the Events on Southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010* (KIC: Bishkek, May 2011), p. iii.

<sup>51</sup> Examples of Twitter messages discussing the developments in Jalalabad in May <<http://bit.ly/eBdKEG>> and <<http://bit.ly/gAkPvk>>; Video of a crowd breaking into the People's Friendship University building in Jalalabad city, <<http://www.blive.kg/video:28957/>>; Video of a crowd breaking through the People's Friendship University building in Jalalabad and of a crying mother over her dead son's body, <<http://www.blive.kg/video:28960/>>; and Slide show of photos from the university after the pogroms, <<http://www.blive.kg/video:28938/>>.

<sup>52</sup> See e.g. @newkyrgyz, Twitter, <<http://twitter.com/newkyrgyz/status/14297661724>> (in Russian).





ethnic Kyrgyz accusing ethnic Uzbeks of wrongdoings and setting fire to Bakiyev's family house, and ethnic Uzbeks accusing ethnic Kyrgyz of hatred towards Uzbeks and of attacking private property. Many outlets tried to avoid discussions of the events in Jalalabad, as it was felt that these issues were too divisive. Instead, the moderators tried to keep the platforms restricted to information exchange.<sup>53</sup>

In contrast to the events in Bishkek, new media coverage of events in Jalalabad was neither as active nor as intensive, in part because the presence of southerners in the country's social media scene was far weaker than that of the urban northern communities, which are predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz and Russians. The south of Kyrgyzstan is poorer than the capital and largely rural in character. Consequently, the southern population lacks access to new media either because they cannot afford it or because their location lacks adequate coverage (as they are not seen as a viable market); this lack of access means a lack of exposure to the technology and its related media.

*The low degree of Internet penetration in the region means the population lacked the familiarity with and necessary skills to use new and social media effectively*

This low degree of Internet penetration in the region means the population lacked the familiarity with and necessary skills to use new and social media effectively. Thus, while some individuals did attempt to act as citizen journalists, often using camera phones, new media was not used widely by Uzbeks or the southern (usually rural) Kyrgyz during the May confrontations, and the events in Jalalabad failed to produce the quantity and quality of multimedia and user-generated content compared to the March–April events in Bishkek.<sup>54</sup> The lack of new media coverage of events in Jalalabad together with the lack of attention in the traditional media meant that there was far less attention to and perhaps appreciation of the gravity of the inter-ethnic dynamics emerging in the south.

## **June 2010**

By early June inter-ethnic relations had become especially tense in the south, notably in and around the city of Osh. During the evening of 10 June a series of violent clashes broke out in Osh between groups of ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. The violence quickly spread and within a few days had engulfed most of southern Kyrgyzstan. In total about 470 persons died in the violence, of which the majority were ethnic Uzbeks. During the four days of violence nearly 2000 received medical assistance. About 110 000 persons crossed into Uzbekistan as refugees, and a further 300 000 were internally displaced.<sup>55</sup> Thousands of buildings were damaged. Many ethnic Kyrgyz also suffered significant losses in terms of life and property.

International media, unlike many of its local counterparts, was fast to react to the June events and had some access to barricaded Uzbek neigh-

<sup>53</sup> Abdugaliyev, M., Owner and administrator of Forum Diesel, Interview with Tolkun Umaraliyev; and Makarov, S., New media specialist, Interview with Tolkun Umaraliyev.

<sup>54</sup> E.g. video of a crowd breaking through the People's Friendship University building in Jalalabad, uploaded 19 May 2010, <<http://www.blive.kg/video:28957/>>.

<sup>55</sup> The Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission reports 426 killed, of which 381 have been identified (276 ethnic Uzbeks, 105 Kyrgyz, and 2 others) with 45 unidentified. Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission (note 50).



bourhoods, as ethnic Uzbeks did not trust the Kyrgyzstani media. Kyrgyzstani media, especially TV, was not active in covering the June events. In the news vacuum created by the absence of state media coverage, new and social media played a significant role in distributing and discussing reports by international media on the events in southern Kyrgyzstan.

Soon after the clashes started, large numbers of videos showing the extreme violence in Osh started to circulate online. Initially, much of the content on YouTube reflected the Uzbeki perspective. It seems likely that refugees fleeing the violence uploaded much of this once they reached Uzbekistan. However, the individuals who uploaded the videos seem to have been unaware of the YouTube rules regarding graphic content as the site's moderators deleted the videos soon after they appeared. There were efforts in Kyrgyzstan to introduce regulation of the Internet in regards to the hosting and disseminating of videos containing scenes of violence and corpses. Efforts to suppress such material were justified as necessary to prevent the escalation of violence. A particular concern was that the material might incite the conflict to spread to the north of the country, where there were many more Internet users.

In light of the inter-ethnic character of the June conflict, many Internet forums, such as Diesel Forum, applied strict moderation rules: some deleted all messages that propagated nationalistic ideas, while others deleted all discussions that went beyond 'just the facts'.<sup>56</sup> With debate on the clashes in the south largely blocked on the principal discussion forums, discussion moved to Twitter, blogs, Facebook and video hosters. From the outset of the violence, discussions quickly took the form of accusations about who instigated the conflict and who was doing the killing. Social media also served as means for distributing rumours and misinformation (e.g. that ethnic Tajiks were involved in the violence, and that those instigating the violence had been drugged etc.).

Although Facebook was the site for moderate debates and calls for reconciliation, it soon also became a forum for the extreme nationalists from all sides of the conflict. The role of ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz living outside the country and more familiar with Facebook as a social media and able to operate using English seems to have been an important factor in its emergence as a key platform together with the fact it was not subject to local censorship. Facebook users actively discussed and reposted the video footage from Osh and Jalalabad that had been produced by the BBC and Al Jazeera. Special pages devoted to the violence appeared. The Al Jazeera journalist Robin Forester-Walker was strongly challenged on Facebook by several ethnic Kyrgyz users for what they believed were one-sided reports from Osh that mainly covered the problems of ethnic Uzbeks. Other journalists from Ferghan.ru and the *New York Times* faced similar attacks. In comparison to the strongly nationalistic debates on Facebook, Twitter had a more moderate tone, with users providing information to help with the distribution of humanitarian aid, reporting on what was happening in the violence and using the platform to facilitate discussions between journalists, human rights activists and local aid and non-governmental organization workers.

***Social media also served as means for distributing rumours and misinformation***

<sup>56</sup> Diesel forum has a code of conduct that is applied to all forum users.

Given that southern Kyrgyzstan had few persons skilled in the use of new media and in contrast to new and social media presence in the movement to overthrow President Bakiyev, there was little direct reporting of the onset of violence on Twitter and Facebook. As the violence spread in the south and garnered more international attention, the presence of social media expanded significantly. The conflict thus spurred an increase in new Twitter accounts and online forum membership, notably by individuals based in the south (as well as other parts of the country), who sought to report on the what was happening, express their political views and discuss the latest developments.

In addition to reporting on the violence as it unfolded, new media users developed a response to it: mobilizing aid for the violence-affected areas. As early as 12 June online forums opened threads to collect humanitarian aid for the victims and to seek volunteers to load humanitarian aid into trucks and aeroplanes.<sup>57</sup> Another new media initiative in response to the violence was the effort to create an Ushahidi community to map the violence as it spread.<sup>58</sup> As the pogroms came to a relatively quick end, the site could not be used for its original purpose. Instead, the site's founders sought to focus it on post-conflict stabilization and aid delivery.<sup>59</sup> In the end, the site played only a minor role because of the limited access to Internet in the south, highlighting the important constraints on using new media in underdeveloped regions.

## V. New media in the post-conflict period

Driven by the momentum of the political and violent upheavals of the year, new media continues to develop in Kyrgyzstan. While Kyrgyzstan enjoys a freer information environment than was the case under President Bakiyev, the media—including new media—continues to face the challenge of operating in a highly polarized political environment.<sup>60</sup> This challenge raises difficult questions about the role of censorship and free speech in building democracy in a post-conflict environment.

Following the June violence, there was a strong desire by many social media users to generate more positive news and to use communication as part of the peacebuilding efforts in the south. For example, young activists created a Facebook group called 'I want peace in Kyrgyzstan'. The group gathered more than 3000 active young people from all over country. Another

<sup>57</sup> [Help the people of Osh and Jalalabad, food, items, medicine], Thread on the forum Diesel to help mobilize aid for the victims of the violence and people in need in southern Kyrgyzstan, 12 June 2010, <<http://diesel.elcat.kg/index.php?showtopic=4196470>>.

<sup>58</sup> 'Ushahidi is a free and open-source software platform used to collect and visualize information . . . Local observers can report incidents via e-mail, web, or text message; their reports are then uploaded to a website and the incident location is plotted on a map (usually using Google Maps) in almost-real time.' Cullum, B., 'How to collect and visualize information and data using Ushahidi', <<http://www.movements.org/how-to/entry/how-to-use-ushahidi/>>.

<sup>59</sup> 'Ushahidi in Kyrgyzstan', <<http://ushahidik.chipin.com/ushahidi-in-kyrgyzstan>>; BloodAndMilk, 'Ushahidi, Twitter, and the future of foreign aid', Global Post, 10 July 2010, <<http://www.globalpost.com/webblog/ngos/ushahidi-twitter-and-the-future-foreign-aid>>; and Abdymomunov, A., 'Crisis-management crowdsourcing platform was launched in Kyrgyzstan to map and share reliable information', 22 June 2010, <<http://www.abdimom.com/blog/crisis-management-crowdsourcing-platform-was-launched-in-kyrgyzstan-to-map-and-share-reliable-information/>>.

<sup>60</sup> Khamidov, A., 'Kyrgyzstan: a free press begets hate speech', EurasiaNet.org, 12 May 2011, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/63473>>.



group of young artists in Bishkek created several videos pieces that promoted tolerance.<sup>61</sup> Many news websites created special sections on their sites entitled ‘Heroes of Osh’, where they wrote about individuals who sheltered and rescued their friends and neighbours irrespective of ethnicity during the violence.<sup>62</sup> Several social networking websites continued initiatives to collect charitable funds for the victims of the conflict.

The upheavals of 2010 gave social media in Kyrgyzstan a far stronger political character than earlier. The Internet became an important battleground in the October parliamentary election, with active online discussion of the political parties’ election programmes and platforms. For the first time, politicians and political parties worked with Internet audiences. As the Internet in Kyrgyzstan was not legally recognized as a part of the mass media, political parties were able to start promoting their ideas, communicating with the electorate and conducting opinion polls several months prior to the official start of the election campaign.

As early as August 2010, many prominent politicians opened accounts on popular social networking sites (e.g. Facebook and Odnoklassniki.ru) and began to promote themselves actively on Twitter and local video hosters.<sup>63</sup> One of the first politicians to become active in Internet campaigning was Nariman Tyuleev, the former mayor of Bishkek, who addressed Internet users via the video hoster blive.kg.<sup>64</sup> One of the interesting formats for communication between politicians and the online electorate was question and answer exchanges; sessions were hosted live on Diesel Forum or forum users were invited to submit questions in advance for use in TV election debates.<sup>65</sup>

Following the elections, new media has continued to develop as a political tool with several deputies in the new parliament actively participating in social networks, like Facebook and Twitter. For instance, at least two young parliamentarians maintain a social media presence, actively writing about developments in the parliament: Shirin Aitmatova, from the political party Ata-Meken, has a Facebook page and a Twitter account, and Dastan Bekeshov, from the political party Ar-Namys, maintains a Twitter account where he posts about his parliamentary work.<sup>66</sup>

The events of 2010 in Kyrgyzstan stimulated the development of new and social media and inspired individuals and communities to look to and use these media in new ways. The new media environment became, as a result, increasingly diverse and complex in Kyrgyzstan, with political issues gaining an important place alongside the range of other issues.

*New media users developed a response to violence as it unfolded: mobilizing aid for the violence-affected areas*

<sup>61</sup> Series of video projects ‘I want peace in Kyrgyzstan’ created by young persons in Bishkek, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNgX3NkkwCU>>, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjgMBPNQj3E>> and <<http://www.blive.kg/video:32745/>>.

<sup>62</sup> Series of positive stories of people in Osh helping each other during the conflict despite their differing ethnic backgrounds, <<http://inkg.info/category/geroi-osha/>>.

<sup>63</sup> Odnoklassniki.ru, or ‘Classmates’, is a Russian language social network service for classmates and old friends reunion popular in Russia and other former Soviet republics created in Mar. 2006.

<sup>64</sup> Video address of former mayor of Bishkek Nariman Tuleev, uploaded 18 Sep. 2010, <<http://www.blive.kg/video:41193/>>.

<sup>65</sup> Topic that collected questions of forums users to the political parties participating in live TV debates, Diesel Forum, <<http://diesel.elcat.kg/index.php?showtopic=5036433>> (in Russian).

<sup>66</sup> Twitter account of Shirin Aitmatova (@thelostroom), <<http://twitter.com/thelostroom>>; and Twitter account of Dastan Bekeshov, <<http://twitter.com/bekeshov>>.



## VI. Conclusions

### **The evolving role of new and social media in political conflict**

The significance of new and social media is now at the centre of a broad debate about understanding the nature of contemporary political and social forces in the context of globalized communications and the potential of new Internet technologies to promote rapid social and political change from below, especially in authoritarian regimes.<sup>67</sup> Following the sense of euphoria that was often attached to initial assessments of the role of social media in social mobilizations for political change, a more considered view of the impact of these media has emerged, even while recognizing its important contribution.<sup>68</sup>

While some observers see the emergence of social media as providing protestors with new tools to coordinate their challenge to the power of ruling orders, others have been more sceptical.<sup>69</sup> The sceptics argue that it is not social media tools that are important to contemporary protest but organization, strategy, hierarchies of authority, resources and, ultimately, a willingness to risk injury and even death.<sup>70</sup> They have pointed to social media as promoting ‘weak ties’ (i.e. where there is little personnel connection) between activists that are insufficient to create the kinds of mobilization and activism necessary to make social revolutions succeed.

Moreover, in many of the countries that have experienced recent social upheaval, Internet access—wired, mobile or both—is limited by lack of capacity, skills and money and by the policies of the regime, which make the use of social media for protest highly restricted. Indeed it may be that generational shifts are the most significant factor in understanding the sources and forms of social protest to emerge in recent years rather than technological change. In North Africa and the Middle East—and to some extent in Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine and Moldova—youth culture, which is hooked into cyberculture much more than its older counterparts, has been at the forefront of popular political protest.

Sceptics thus warn of the danger of ‘cyber-utopianism’—a belief in the power of the Internet to transform societies for the better. Indeed some authors have highlighted the potential for social media as a means of repression, as much as liberation as repressive regimes use the new technology as a tool to control their population.<sup>71</sup> Concern about the potential repressive functions of the Internet has promoted the United States and several

*Events in Kyrgyzstan pointed to the importance of a set of enabling conditions as defining the ways in which new and social media tools could be used*

<sup>67</sup> Cottle, S., ‘Media and the Arab Uprisings of 2011: Research Notes’, *Journalism*, July 2011, 12, pp. 647–59; Harb, Z., ‘Revolutions and social media’, *Media/Culture*, vol. 14, no. 2, May 2011; Lynch, M., ‘After Egypt: the limits and promise of online challenges to the authoritarian Arab state’, *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 9, no. 02 (2011), pp. 301–10.

<sup>68</sup> Zuckerman, E., ‘The first Twitter Revolution’, *Foreign Policy*, 14 Jan. 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Shirky, C., ‘The political power of social media: technology, the public sphere, and political change’, *Foreign Affairs*, Jan./Feb. 2011; and Gladwell, M., ‘An absence of evidence’, *Foreign Affairs*, Mar./Apr. 2011.

<sup>70</sup> Gladwell, M., ‘Small change: why the revolution will not be tweeted’, *New Yorker*, Oct. 4, 2010.

<sup>71</sup> Morozov, E., *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (Public Affairs: New York, 2011). Baer, D. B., ‘Promises we keep online: Internet in the OSCE Region: testimony before the Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe’, <<http://www.humanrights.gov/2011/07/15/promises-we-keep-online-internet-in-the-osce-region/>>, 15 July 2011; and Halliday, J.,





European governments to support efforts to strengthen Internet freedoms through the adoption of a set of international commitments—including access to the Internet as a human right—within the framework of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Following the line of sceptics, some observers have been critical of the idea that social media played a significant role in the events in Kyrgyzstan during the spring of 2010, while others have argued that Twitter together with other media made it possible for diverse forces to come together, build support from the international community and provide information on what was happening.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, some have even gone so far as to suggest that the protests in Kyrgyzstan—together with other recent social protests—would not have been possible without the Internet and that, through the tools of the new media, the Internet helps to build democracies.<sup>73</sup>

### **The social media and political upheaval in Kyrgyzstan**

The events of 2010 in Kyrgyzstan offer no simple answer to the current debate about the role of social media in advancing processes of political change. The period from early 2010 to the overthrow of President Bakiyev clearly highlighted the contribution that new media can play in providing opposition movements with new tools to assist in their actions against incumbent regimes. At the same time, events in Kyrgyzstan pointed to the importance of a set of enabling conditions—technical, economic, social and political—as defining the ways in which these tools could be used.

In the first months of 2010, a primary function of new media was its capacity to facilitate citizen journalism and simply to provide information. New media, notably Twitter, reported on events that were not being covered by the heavily censored and pro-regime conventional media. Its ability to bypass state censors meant that new media became an alternative source of both providing and receiving information about what was happening. New media was able to propagate information sourced from a range of perspectives: first-hand accounts, reposting the accounts of others and accounts put forward by traditional media outlets. Furthermore, it conveyed the information with considerable speed, which offered a sense of urgency and proximity to events that conventional media could not match.

Thus, new media offered communication and information channels that were fast and that the regime found difficult to break up as it lacked the knowledge and flexibility to track and disrupt the rapidly changing information environment. Hence, new and social media became one of the chief means to build support for the opposition. Using the hashtag #freetkg, the opposition established a single information channel and organizational centre that seems to have played a positive role in the challenge to the Bakiyev regime, notably in the final phase of the confrontation on 7 April.

<sup>72</sup> 'Government backs down on plan to shut Twitter and Facebook in crises, *The Guardian*, 25 Aug. 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/aug/25/government-plan-shut-twitter-facebook>>

<sup>73</sup> Morozov, E., 'Kyrgyzstan's "Analogue Revolution"', *Foreign Policy*, 8 Apr. 2010, <[http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/04/08/kyrgyzstans\\_analog\\_revolution](http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/04/08/kyrgyzstans_analog_revolution)>; and Fitzpatrick, C., 'Yes, Kyrgyzstan's Red Blood Tulip Revolution is a Twitter Revolution', Blog OSCE Unbound, 8 Apr. 2010, <[http://3dblogger.typepad.com/osce\\_unbound/2010/04/yes-kyrgyzstans-red-blood-tulip-revolution-is-a-twitter-revolution.html](http://3dblogger.typepad.com/osce_unbound/2010/04/yes-kyrgyzstans-red-blood-tulip-revolution-is-a-twitter-revolution.html)>.

<sup>73</sup> Sheridan, B., 'The Internet helps build democracies', *Newsweek*, 30 Apr. 2010.



Accounts of the experience from users of social media during this period suggest that new media played a role in shaping opinion and even in radicalizing the challenge to Bakiyev. Interaction through online connections to share information about the corruption, illegal activities and use of violence by the Bakiyev regime created a sense of a distinct community that upheld common values. This feeling of a common purpose also provided the basis for helping to organize, through social media, groups to try to prevent looting and violence in Bishkek on the evening of 7 April, after Bakiyev had fled to the south. The actual numbers involved in these activities was, however, relatively small, and the impact of opinion-shaping functions of new and social media seems to have been confined to a narrow, although influential, group concentrated in the capital.

The valuable contribution of social media to the opposition during this period also needs to be set in context. The opposition movement and the onset of the wave of protest that eventually forced Bakiyev from office predated the significant engagement of social media with these political issues. The drive of the opposition was provided by grievances about the regime, corruption and the deteriorating economy, and the opposition was able to mobilize protests in response to these issues using long-standing organizational resources such as political parties, patronage and family networks, and civil society organizations. Moreover, social media was not essential for the success of the opposition, although its use may have accelerated the overthrow of the regime and mobilized or radicalized some individuals and groups that might not otherwise have joined the protests. New media did not replace conventional forms of protest; rather its main contribution should be seen as supplementing existing protest tools—notably the mobile phone,

which had been used to organize activism in Kyrgyzstan since the late 1990s. The Internet community in Kyrgyzstan was relatively small, and the overwhelming majority of those who took to the streets to challenge the regime of President Bakiyev seem to have had little direct connection to this community. The ‘strong ties’ (i.e. the direct personnel links that have been found to lie at the heart of social movements) that

bound the opposition and provided the means to mobilize significant numbers of people onto the street were formed via the conventional means of protest movements (e.g. political parties, civil society organizations, patronage networks and political activism at the local level). New media served to amplify and accelerate developments rather than to provide the means for the opposition to organize and mobilize mass support.

At the same time, developments in this period also suggest that for new media to play a leading role in socio-political transformation, prerequisite conditions must be met. First, there was a sizable and active technologically savvy community. This community was mostly populated with a young generation of Russian-speaking, urban residents—essentially based in Bishkek. Second, large parts of this community shared a similar outlook, which included opposition to the Bakiyev regime. Third, powerful members of the opposition were also engaged in new media and sought to use these tools in the face of strong state influence and even control over the traditional media. Conversely, the incumbent regime and its supporters did not have a developed relationship with new media nor had the regime established a policy on

***The impact of opinion-shaping functions of new and social media seems to have been confined to a narrow, although influential, group***



how to disrupt and manipulate new media, as it had for conventional media. For this reason, new media was not contested by opposing political forces but rather was monopolized by the opposition, including both its leadership and its supporters.

As the political turmoil continued in Kyrgyzstan, a more media-savvy political environment confronted new media. Here the original group of Internet users that had rallied to the opposition in early 2010 could be far less influential as the range of political views and users multiplied and political figures of different hues became more aware of and skilled in using the Internet for political ends.

The polarization of Kyrgyzstani society along ethnic lines during and after the June violence served, in particular, to destroy the political cohesiveness of the Internet community established in early 2010. The site ‘Checked—no rumours!’ (Provereno—slukhov net!) provides an example of the challenge presented by the May–June events to the operation of new media.<sup>74</sup> The site was set up after the 7 April events to provide the online community with a way to challenge unfounded rumours by checking the facts. The site proved popular in a media environment where the traditional media was neither challenging nor correcting unfounded information and accusations. However, during the June violence several months later, the website could not be used effectively as it was overwhelmed by competing versions of the truth and a lack of means to verify developments on the ground.

The nature of the two conflicts was different in important ways, and new media was used differently in each. The bipolar contest between the Bakiyev regime and its opponents was essentially an ethnically intra-Kyrgyz competition for power. In this struggle the opposition often drew on a sense of Kyrgyz patriotism as part of its message. On occasion, this patriotism tipped into overt Kyrgyz nationalism. The entry of ethnic Uzbeks into the political contest introduced a third element that began to split the opposition, with some Kyrgyz elements hostile to Uzbek political awakening.

In the March–April period, new media was a conduit for citizen journalism and worked to mobilize and unite groups, and there was a sense of a united online community working together in solidarity. The violence of May–June, however, highlighted some of the limits of new media as a tool for the transformation of society. The online community began to reflect the divisions, arguments, tensions and nationalist views emerging in the wider society. As individuals, notably from the south, began to join new media sites, these disputes were magnified, and the online community itself became part of the battleground connected to the growing ethnic polarization in the country. Once the June violence began, polarization accelerated rapidly as members of the different groups sought to use new media to present their version of events and to undermine the other versions.

During the clashes the sense of the online community largely functioning together against the regime was replaced with a bitter struggle that frequently seemed to overwhelm discussion forums and blogs. Experienced users of Twitter were often suspicious of the new accounts that appeared during the

***New media served to amplify and accelerate developments rather than to provide the means for the opposition to organize and mobilize mass support***

<sup>74</sup> Website ‘Provereno—slukhov nyet!’ [Checked—no rumours!], [inkg.info](http://inkg.info).

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# NEW SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONFLICT IN KYRGYZSTAN

NEIL MELVIN AND TOLKUN UMARALIEV

## CONTENTS

I. Introduction	1
II. Telecommunications, media and politics	2
Telecommunications infrastructure and user demographics	2
Politics, protest and the social media leading up to the conflicts of 2010	4
III. Political conflict breaks out in Bishkek	6
March 2010	6
April 2010	8
The fall of Bakiyev	10
IV. Ethnic conflict breaks out in Jalalabad	12
May 2010	12
June 2010	14
V. New media in the post-conflict period	16
VI. Conclusions	18
The evolving role of new and social media in political conflict	18
The social media and political upheaval in Kyrgyzstan	19

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June conflicts, as some of the new users made attempts to instigate ethnic hatred. Diesel Forum blocked registration for several days in response to the rise of racial and ethnic hatred messages, and users spreading provocative messages were often banned from the forum with their Internet protocol (IP) addresses being included on a 'black list'. The events of May–June 2010 suggested that if societies are deeply divided, as in southern Kyrgyzstan, new media is likely to become part of the battleground over these divisions. In these circumstances, rather than being a tool for political transformation, new media is likely to function more as a mirror of the society within which it operates.

New media made a significant contribution to the protests that were eventually to topple President Bakiyev, but it did not drive this process and its importance has to be seen alongside the more conventional mobilization techniques employed by the opposition and the role of traditional international media—which was often the source of social media reporting. The use of new media in March–April by the opposition may also reflect the opportunities of a historical moment. Following the political turmoil of 2010, governments and their supporters are likely to be more aware of the importance of new media and to be better prepared and more skilled in challenging opposition movements that seek to use new media to challenge incumbent regimes of the future.





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