



# The TUQAY

ESSAYS FROM BEYOND THE WELL-PROTECTED DOMAINS.

## Coffeehouse 3.0 Of Spies & Bloggers in Our Midst by Christopher Schwartz - 15.10.2012

When farangi find out that I'm a professional blogger working on Central Asia, they usually pause and ask, with all sincerity, "they have the Internet out there?"

I'm not trying to make a dig at my fellow Occidentals. It's true that, for one reason or another, Central Asia tends to be the big gaping hole in global consciousness; in my experience, the region's own neighbors in China and India, and even their former masters in Russia, have a hard time finding it on a map. But yes, the blog is in Central Asia.

In fact, it's exploded, especially since my blogging network, NewEurasia Citizen Media (neweurasia.net) went online in late 2005. It was the region's first. Back then, we were really on the cutting edge of the Central Asian mediascape, working alongside a few local bloggers like Elena Skochilo (Kyrgyzstan) and Asqat Yerkimbay and Adil "Adam Kesh" Nurmakov (Kazakhstan), and of course Nathan Hamm, whose Registan (registan.net) was/is arguably the great-granddaddy of Central Asian blogging (even though Hamm is an American).

### **The Rapidly Increasing Dominance of Connectivity**

I say "exploded", but I can't provide you solid numbers to prove this isn't just hyperbole. Shockingly, there are no good statistics available on global growth rates of blogging (here's a 2010 report from Sysomos, but it's not especially revelatory). Or at least, there is none available for free to a poor writer like me and certainly no statistics worth their weight in kilobytes for Central Asia. We know that as of February 2011, there were 156 million registered blogs in the world, but it's impossible to know how many of these are Central Asian, although we can logically guess that they weren't a significant proportion. Attempts to get hard numbers from the service providers themselves can prove fruitless; in 2011, when Kazakhstan banned WordPress, I asked the service for some insight into their usership statistics from the country, but they refrained from sharing, citing security concerns. All we at NewEurasia can say with certainty at the moment is that there has been "a lot" more blogs in the region since we started. Indeed, there exists today a full-fledged blogosphere; we even call it the "Stanosphere".

Back in 2009, Hamm lamented:

Bloggers, especially those of 2002-2004 vintage, are pretty much parasites: we consume and reprocess other media. So those of us who built their schtick around blogging on Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan [one of the world's most repressive regimes], have had a hard time of it the past couple years. There has been less reporting on the region, and while there was always plenty of bad reporting on the region from 2001-2005, it sometimes seems that the proportion of fairly uninformative or downright bad reporting on the region has risen from 2006-2009.

A year later, such a position had to be revised. In April and June 2010, blogs, alongside other social media, were making their presence felt with a vengeance in Kyrgyzstan's violent second revolution and subsequent inter-ethnic conflict. This is all the more remarkable considering that only 39.8% of the country had Internet access at the time. However, these individuals were crucially placed in Bishkek and Osh - the country's hubs demographically, infrastructurally and politically - where they could spread information to their less-wired countrymen via word-of-mouth and mobile phone. Bloggers and phone-videographers were thus performing the same functions that rag newspapers did in the Press' early days: allowing connected individuals to disperse knowledge (and sometimes rumor) with stunning speed.

The Internet is even beginning to penetrate Turkmenistan, the world's second most closed and totalitarian country after North Korea. Not even 2% of its population is wired, and yet only a month or so ago, the new platform SalamTurkmen burst onto the "Turkmenet" like gangbusters. With already a thousand subscribers on its Facebook community page - just about the entire Turkmenistani presence on the social network, by the way - I think it may be fair to say that social media, and by extension blogging, has truly arrived in Central Asia, and that its incursion cannot be reversed. The real question now is: toward what end shall it ultimately serve?

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### A Short History of Modern Communication

The philosopher Jürgen Habermas has ranted and raved about the importance of the coffeehouse/salon for the emergence of Modernity in the West. In fact, he has developed an entire moral-political theory based upon it: the ideal of “inclusive critical discussion, free of social and economic pressures, in which interlocutors treat each other as equals in a cooperative attempt to reach an understanding on matters of common”. Now, many Westerners might roll their eyes that the blogosphere, with all its bickering and sniping, could ever hope to be, as it were, the coffeehouse 3.0. They forget, though, that the original coffeehouses were as much filled with soap opera as the blogs today. The French philosophes who led the Revolution were as much fueled by Versailles gossip as by Enlightenment ideas.

The Central Asians have a long tradition of the chaikhana, the teahouse (from chai, tea), exactly analogous to Habermas' beloved coffeehouse. We at NewEurasia realized that it's going digital; as seen in Kyrgyzstan, they are turning to user-generated and user-disseminated content in a form of citizen-journalism that unfolds in blogs, vlogs, tweets and online forums. The resultant literature is quite messy, as these new digizens struggle to make sense of the critical viewpoints from the outside and, increasingly, from within. And like the old French salon, this cyber-chaikhana can get quite heated, fueled by gossip yes, but also by ideas, ranging from American liberalism to radical Islamism. David Coady argues in the penultimate chapter of his new book, *What to Believe Now*, that Westerners have too quickly come to take for granted the blog, forgetting how powerful a tool for informing and empowering it can be. The Central Asians are not making that mistake.

### The Foggy Spots on the Internet's Map

The blog still has a long way to go, though, in terms of penetration. So, in 2011, NewEurasia published *CyberChaikhana: Digital Conversations from Central Asia*, a chronicle of the region covering the period 2005-2010 comprised of blog posts from the Stanosphere. We wanted to capture some of this “digital chai” in physical form, to elevate it to the status of literature so that it could serve as a kind of mirror for Central Asians, and so

that the idea of the Stanosphere as a cyber-chaikhana could reach places in the region that code still cannot tread. Indeed, in April 2011, six of us (myself included) trekked across Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, including to several remote locations in the latter, to hand out copies of the book.

Will CyberChaikhana be successful? It is impossible to know. But I do remember how the Stanosphere blew up in reaction. One reviewer wrote, “So, you read the book and there is always a thought digging into your brain (like a cat digging and cluttering the content of its litter box) that everything is so bad.” They were looking into the mirror and not liking what they were seeing.

I do know that our book irked at least two governments in the region. The United States Embassy in Uzbekistan requested sixty copies, but the border guards wouldn't let it in (and they expressed their disapproval by battering the delivery box). And here's an anecdote from Kazakhstan, one which examples not only that country's authorities' response to our book, but also illustrates some of their distrust of the Stanosphere in general.

### Of the Enthusiasm of Spies

Back in April 2011, I was attending the annual Central Asia Barcamp – yep, they've got those, too – in Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan, to promote our book. A rather beautiful woman showed up from Astana, the new capital. You have to remember that these events are usually populated by, well, nerds, so this bejeweled lady was quite salient. She also seemed very keen to learn about our organization, NewEurasia, and in particular, me. My other NewEurasia colleagues and I smelled trouble .

Late one evening, she followed an Uzbekistani colleague and I to a pub to attend a presentation we were making to other bloggers. I talked for a few minutes before turning the stage over to him, where he began to talk about the importance of blogging in his country. The lady from Astana was spellbound as he revealed the lurid details of repression, both digital and physical, in his country. Her questions evidenced that she honestly had no idea about what was happening just south of the border. My colleague eventually convinced her to have a smoke and a drink, and with a wink at me, took her

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outside. About two hours later, she went home and he came in laughing. During the course of their conversation, she revealed – surprise, surprise – that she was a spy.

Actually, her official job was to monitor blogs for criticism of the government on behalf of Kazakhstan's intelligence agency, and to write counter-comments (under various pseudonyms). Not very glamorous – nor especially effective – but for real. She had come to the barcamp to find out more about us, and yes, more about me; she had also taken several copies of our book for her superiors to read (she thought we didn't notice; we did).

The next day, she and I finally had a sit-down. We talked about the political situation of Kazakhstan – she was keen to get me to admit that the government's recent manipulation of the democratic process was an evil, but I insisted that the United States has always struggled with making its elections truly free and fair. Eventually, I managed to turn the conversation around to her. It was clear to me that she was very intelligent and educated; what, then, did she really want to do with her life? Embarrassed, she acquiesced, revealing that she herself desperately wanted to blog – about fashion. I must admit, it was somehow touching. So, with all sincerity, I offered that she blog for us, under a pseudonym of course, adding that we could compensate her.

I had never before seen as huge a pair of saucer eyes as I saw that moment. She said she would consider it, then she hurried away. None of us have ever seen her again – although I would bet good money that she's blogging by now. ♦