New media in protest mobilization: the case of April 7 uprising in Kyrgyzstan

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If new media change the politics of unrest, revolution, violence, and civil war, then governments and civil society need to understand how, so as to better respond to events as they are happening.

Blogs and Bullets, US Institute of Peace, 2010
“New media and ICT are at the heart of the political and social upheaval that has been rocking the Arab world in recent months - a precedent that was set in Central Asia in 2010.”

(Alexander WOLTERS, 2011)
Kyrgyzstan

- Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet republic of 5.5 mil. in Central Asia, experienced a second violent uprising on April 7, 2010, just five years after the famed March 24, 2005 “Tulip Revolution”.

- President Bakiev, who in 2005 took over after 15 years of rule by the country’s first president, Askar Akaev, made the situation even worse.

- On April 7, Bakiev used snipers against protesters, having killed over 80 people.
ICT in Kyrgyzstan

- Despite the fact that Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest countries in the post-Soviet space, Internet development was always a priority.
- Internet is increasingly becoming a part of everyday life of the population.
- Increasing geographical coverage by cell and Internet providers contribute to the growth.
- The first mobile access was launched in 1994, and today there are more than 4 million users (based on the number of active SIM cards)
Internet users in Kyrgyzstan

Growth in the number of Internet users in Kyrgyzstan
(source: State Agency under the Government of KR, numbers are in millions)
### Number of Internet users in Central Asia, 2010
(Source: Internet World Stats)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Number of users</th>
<th>Internet Penetration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>5,418,300</td>
<td>2,194,400</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakstan</td>
<td>15,460,484</td>
<td>5,300,000</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>27,865,738</td>
<td>4,689,000</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>7,487,489</td>
<td>700,000</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmenistan</td>
<td>4,940,916</td>
<td>80,400</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Most popular Internet resources in Kyrgyzstan
(source: webomer.ru)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>mail.ru (Russian web-based email)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>odnoklassniki.ru (Russian social networking site)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>diesel.elcat.kg (local social networking platform)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>yandex.ru (Russian search engine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>google.kg; google.ru; google.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>namba.kg (local file-sharing and video platform)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>wikipedia.org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>torrent.kg (file-sharing website)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>akipress.org (Kyrgyz news agency)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>facebook.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>rambler.ru (Russian search engine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>blive.kg (integrated SN + file-sharing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>youtube.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>torrents.kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>vkontakte.ru (Russian Social Networking site)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kyrgyz Twitter
Kyrgyz Twitter

With the support of the Open Society Foundations in Kyrgyzstan, the Civil Initiative on Internet Policy began discussion with Twitter executives on how to aggregate tweets about Kyrgyzstan and make the service cheaper for users.

The creation of Tweet.kg brought together Kyrgyz twitter users into a single community and Kyrgyzstan became the first of the former Soviet Republics to have its own short code, allowing mobile phone users to send tweets at a reduced cost.
RQ and Methodology

- How new media were used during April 7-9 events (uprising and subsequent unstable nights).

- Methodology – in addition to content analysis of websites, in-depth interviews with
  - Those who participated in the uprising by being physically present among protesters in the square and those who fought looting on April 7-8 (total of 15 participants)
  - Those who covered the events in both traditional media and new media – journalists, bloggers, youth movement activists (total of 8 experts)
Results: Mobilization

- Information about the protest scheduled for April 7 with calls to come and participate appeared not only on Diesel forum, the main political participatory platform in the country, but also on other websites that allowed user comments – AkiPress, Bely Parus, Kloop.kg, Fergana.ru and Twitter (for the first time, not used in 2005)

- The messages were so persistent, frequent, and emotional, that many users started to note that “something big was going to happen”
Results: Protest

- Nation-wide problems with the Internet on April 6 and 7 - the government security forces blocked important websites, such as “Azattyk” (RFERL), 24.kg, fergana.ru
- The cell phone networks were often down due to overload, making use of the Internet difficult, but texting was still possible
- Many participants reported that they used cell phones to talk to their relatives and friends to inform them they were OK, especially after the snipers started to shoot and kill protesters
- Relatives and friends then posted information on Twitter and Diesel, which also had links to a live feed from a SaimaTelecom video camera embedded on namba.kg and set up on a building roof with the view of the main square
Results: Looting

- Diesel was the main platform for organization and mobilization of People’s Guards – volunteer brigades that moved around the city to prevent looting of stores and other commercial property.

- Looters also figured out the role of Diesel forum for the People’s Guards and started screening it for their movement.

- Subsequently, People’s Guards stated to use cell phones, but the coordination numbers were widely published on Diesel.
“On the Internet I have at least 10 channels, such as a mailing list of all Youth Activist Groups, a mailing yahoogroups, in which there are all NGOs are sitting, they all reported about the movement of Drujenniki, there were NGO people who were with them and always wrote what is happening where, on Twitter, Facebook people have written about where they had seen lootings, for example, one writes ”on Kievskaya street the looters went on that direction, shouting and..” so on, and then another says “we just saw them near the Philharmony”, and so on.”
“On internet the information was disseminated very quickly, rapidly, but there was created a lot of different fake accounts and many people simply trying to provoke the society in order to scare people and create some chaos.”
“I personally did not go out on the street on these days, because it was not protected, but I could help. There are special groups mobilized on the Internet and when somebody gave the information about lootings, we immediately gave phone and said call back. Or called them and said that we have informed the groups that there is a looting. And it lasted do not remember how many days, but in principle each day, we sat down and told the groups where the looting is happening so that they could respond quickly. In this vein may be noted the fight against looters. I could not just go out to defend because I did another historic mission, telling the world about what happened and why it is necessary to support the new government.”
“I wrote on my blog about these events, and about 10 thousand people read it, so I wrote for another blog, whose representative I am here in Kyrgyzstan neweuroasia.net in English, Russian, Kyrgyz, that is, in three languages, plus I wrote on Twitter, Facebook, Linkedin, to some extent because there is a professional environment, they were also afraid and wondered what happened here, in general, information spread very rapidly and with it most likely people who were on Twitter, on Facebook and other such resources, they were among the first who could do it and often some of the data they have not even been published anywhere but there remained, but the people who were able to read, they read. Another issue is what I wrote using Twitter hashtags, my tweets went to a lot of media such as CNN, AlJazeera, a whole bunch of different media world, television, and they called me, because they saw that I write about it.”
“Firstly when one says that somewhere there is a looting, we call anyone on the Diesel who lives in this region and can confirm this, because they immediately confirm this online by looking at their windows: "No it's not true, I live close by."

Even the twitter in principle on all such issues could not answer, because only about 1000 users were there, but in any case, people had time to say "no, not here and everything is fine". Mobile phone connection was not very good in the evenings, more information we have drawn from the internet.”
“Media NGOs founded a website allkg.info and there is no rumor and, accordingly, only verified information came out. But it happened a little later, at first we all sat on Skype, Twitter, forums, and then this website was launched after a week probably and it started actively after the Kremlin started to disseminate false information about the discrimination against Russians and so on and the guys checked, they said the church is not blown up, it is safe on the street.”
Conclusions

- In April events, activists and protesters used new media to mobilize and organize their efforts.
- The activists added Twitter and texting to their tool mix of already widely used online media, social utility networks, online forums, and blogs during April events.
- New media, especially blogging and forums, provided unprecedented amount of raw, emotionally-charged first-hand accounts of events that made the work of professional journalists more challenging in terms of fact-checking and verification of such accounts.
- Many participants noted that even though new media were not a necessary condition for a revolution, they certainly made it much easier – pattern that is observed in Arab Spring as well.
Thank you for your attention!