

# ONLINE EDITIONS IN UZBEKISTAN: ZONE OF INACTION

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**Uzbekistan has imposed a state monopoly of Web access in a bid to gain control of the information flow. Costly Internet services make access to the World Wide Web prohibitive while Internet journalism remains in its infancy.**

There is no legislation in Uzbekistan that is relevant to the Web. All relations within the sphere of computer and information technologies are subject to a few laws, including those "On Communication", "On Informatization", "On Radio-Frequency Spectrum", "On the Protection of Consumers' Rights" as well as to a number of normative documents. The Law on Informatization covers relations among government authorities, juridical and physical persons in the field of collection, accumulation, processing, transfer, use and protection of data. Moreover, the document specifies that the law does not apply to information subject to other laws (Mass Media Law, etc.).

On the other hand, the Mass Media Law says that mass media in Uzbekistan includes "newspapers, magazines, newsletters, bulletins, news agencies, television (cablecasting or cable-and-on-air broadcasting), radio broadcasting, documentaries, digital information media as well as state-owned, independent and any other mass periodicals, which are published under a permanent name".

It remains unclear whether the law determines online editions as the "digital information media" or

not but, whatever, all firms and companies dealing with information technologies across Uzbekistan, including providers, must be officially registered to obtain a license from the State Committee for the Press.

## INTERNET LAW WANTED

The Mass Media Law contains no specification as to the definition of the Internet. The Cabinet has adopted a number of normative documents, including the Rules of access to and use of the national data transmission network by providers and subscribers and the Regulations for the preparation and spread of data resources of the Republic of Uzbekistan within the data transmission network, including the Internet. Essentially, both documents make it clear that the state-owned company Uzpak, is vested with the exclusive right to provide Internet access and, hence, control data transmission and dictate its own tariff policy.

Internet experts have more than once pointed to the need for a special law dealing with the Web. In February 2002, this question was discussed at a round table, held in Tashkent to focus on computer and information technologies. The majority of the 67 providers currently active in the country attended it. It can hardly be

expected that an Internet Law will be adopted in the near future. According to Utkir Khashimov, parliament's press committee chairman, the bill is not even on the wait list for 2002.

Nor is there any official data available on how online journalism is developing in Uzbekistan, except in an article headlined "Assessing Uzbekistan's Readiness to Join the Information Community" published in two issues of Economic Review magazine last autumn. The author, Dmitri Revin, wrote it on the basis of a report he had compiled in August 2001 for the Uzbekistan Development Gateway project. This project started in May 2000 as a joint initiative of World Bank's InfoDev and Center for Economic Studies with the support of the government of Uzbekistan. It aims to bridge the digital gap between Uzbekistan and industrialized nations and help Uzbekistan integrate into the world economy and information space. The publication cites a lot of statistics demonstrating, for example, that between 40,000 and 50,000 Uzbekistani Internet users do not visit the Web more than once a week with 90%-95% of all users in Uzbekistan being concentrated in Tashkent.

The report predicts, among other things, that this year alone will see a 300,000 increase of Internet users to a record one million by 2005. As for Web journalism, D.Revin cites no figures in this respect. In the meantime, the

number of electronic (Internet) news media is daily growing.

### PRINT MEDIA SITES

Many print media have their own web sites today. Among them are “Narodnoye slovo” (People’s Word) [www.hc.uzpak.uz](http://www.hc.uzpak.uz) (Russian version), “BWW” - [www.bww.uz](http://www.bww.uz), “Delovoy Partnyor Uzbekistana” (Business Partner of Uzbekistan) [www.hamkor.uzpak.uz](http://www.hamkor.uzpak.uz) and many others. Active are also the following sites of news agencies – National News Agency (UZA) - [www.uza.uz](http://www.uza.uz) (in Russian, English and Uzbek) and the Foreign Ministry’s Jahon agency - [www.Jahon.uz](http://www.Jahon.uz). There is also a digital magazine, the sole one in Uzbekistan - [www.Internet.uz](http://www.Internet.uz). Nearly all Tashkent-based commercial radio stations and some TV channels have their own web sites: Grand radio station - [www.grand.uz](http://www.grand.uz), Sezam - [www.shaw.uz](http://www.shaw.uz) (sezam), Yoshlar television channel - [www.davr-tv.uz](http://www.davr-tv.uz).

Unfortunately, they are not regularly updated, and some remain idle. However, the UZA site provides a major source of information about Uzbekistan. According to one of its journalists, although it was opened three years ago it has been working actively only since mid-2001 when the agency formed an Internet department. It comes out in three versions – Russian, English and Uzbek. The material is different from that which UZA subscribers receive. As the journalist put it, they contain “maximum information and minimum words”. Over a year and a half they have created an archive of 3,000 files.

The site of Delovoy partnyor Uzbekistana is also worth mentioning, the journalist continued. It was founded by the

Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations, which has a wealth of data regarding Uzbekistan trade with foreign countries. According to the UZA journalist, Pravda Vostoka newspaper does not often update its site while Narodnoye Slovo, in contrast, makes daily updates, except on those days when it does not come out. Unfortunately, it arranges its texts in the form of a long typed sheet so that reading it calls for a great deal of patience. Formally, information presented on the above sites may differ from their print, TV or radio versions but, in content, the publications mirror the stance of the official structures, their sponsors.

### E-COMMERCE GROWTH

In addition, Uzbekistan has seen a growth in the market for commercial sites, web portals, which present news lines and analytical material. As a rule, these belong to various business structures. Since the absence of official statistics makes it hard to cite the exact number of online media one is free to keep count based on one’s own sources. Thus, [www.Rambler^s.ru/top\\_100/](http://www.Rambler^s.ru/top_100/) puts the number of registered sites at 125, of which 15 are media sites: [www.UzReport.com](http://www.UzReport.com) (Russian, Uzbek and English versions), Uzland – a guide to Uzbekistan, chat of Uzland, Show Bis Uz (basically show business), Web anthology “Tashkentskiye Kuranty” (Tashkent Chimes), the press center of the Human Rights Society, news analysis site “Stability” (dealing with problems related to international terrorism, religious extremism and other issues of importance), [www.fergana.ru](http://www.fergana.ru), reports from the Turkiston Press news agency, Computer-Asia –

[www.medianet.uz](http://www.medianet.uz). There is also a site of the press service of the President’s staff, which comes out in Russian and English. Its publications include the President’s decrees and speeches, coverage of President Karimov’s foreign visits and comments on reforms now under way in the country. And, finally, there is a web newspaper, “Open Tribune” ([www.opentribune.freenet.uz](http://www.opentribune.freenet.uz)), that was created specifically to publicize censored local materials.

### ONLINE JOURNALISM

According to deputy director of the UzReport.com Internet portal Yuri Perevozkin, the Uzbekistani sites do not play any visible part in the information market as they account for a meager 2%-3% of the Republic’s related structure. “By and large, such editions cannot be called professional in the true sense of the word. Their staff are predominantly ambitious young people inexperienced in journalism,” says Yu.Perevozkin. He believes that only two sites, [fergana.ru](http://fergana.ru) and [UzReport.com](http://UzReport.com), employ highly qualified professionals. But whatever the skills of online media journalists, they are all prey to continuous state control and self-censorship. Should a web outlet publish an article that the authorities see as “dubious” it will be closed right away and the founder’s license revoked.

That explains why users will never find full information about their own country in online media registered in Uzbekistan. Nor will they ever find any material revealing a variety of views with regard to the vital points of social life.

Yet, there are ways to get information about Uzbekistan in the Internet. The most extensive

and credible sources of information are web media stationed abroad – in the neighboring Central Asian countries, in Russia and in other foreign countries. Internet users, including journalists, have free access to materials placed on Kyrgyzstan's or Kazakhstan's sites - - [www.caapr.kz](http://www.caapr.kz) è [www.navigator.kg](http://www.navigator.kg)

One can find there publications dealing with subjects of which most citizens of Uzbekistan have no idea – a disruption by Uzbekistan's government of gas supplies to Kyrgyzstan, issues related to regional water management, etc. According to Yu.Perevozkin, in his work he draws much information from foreign sites. For example, on the site of the US Department of Agriculture you can always get the latest reports about its trade with Uzbekistan that you will never find on the sites of counterparts in

Uzbekistan.

Regrettably, most ordinary citizens – reporters included – are cut off from the Internet by lack of cash. According to director of a Tashkent-based provider company Timur Alimov, a minimum monthly wage will suffice for only three hours on the Internet. That's why even in the capital city there are so few media people who have personal computers at home to connect to the Internet. A lot of Internet cafes and clubs have popped up over the past year and a half but there are very few who can make use of their services. Reporters simply cannot afford it. Some media people have access to the Internet via office computers but you can count these on the fingers of one hand.

According to a reporter working with the Uzbekistan Broadcasting Company, there is

only one computer for every five or six workers at best, while there are entire departments with no computers at all. That accounts for the fact that the majority of journalists cannot handle computers. Until recently, there were training courses, but these are useless if you cannot put your skills to practice. In a company broadcasting nationwide there may be only one computer with Internet access.

Still worse is the situation in the regions. Neither provincial nor district newspapers have Internet connection. An absolute majority of the Uzbekistani reporters view getting access to the World Wide Web as a never-never, says news analyst of the Turkiston-press non-governmental news agency Viktor Nikolayev. In his opinion, you must be a high-paid foreign journalist to be able to buy a computer and pay for Internet services.

## UZBEKISTAN IN GLOBAL CYBERSPACE: SCIENTIFIC STUDIES

The first attempt to explore and elaborate a conceptual basis of using the Web as an economic and operational means of integrating Uzbekistan into the global cyberspace and information service market has been made by the public relations and advertisement department at the faculty of journalism of the Mirzo Ulugbek National University. The project was a dissertation called «Peculiarities of Online Journalism Formation and Specific Features of the Internet As A Global Mass Medium» written by Dildora Rashidova, who successfully defended it as a Ph.D. thesis.

The work focused on the global computer network, basically viewing it as a mass medium: emergence, formation, genre specificity, peculiarities of online journalism and its current bottlenecks. On the other hand, the subject of analysis was the contents, laws regulating the Internet functioning, its transformation into an information structure and eventually into a mass medium.

The author outlined several major problems: the Internet as a kind of mass media against the background and under the impact of the formation of a global information market and information globalization in general; online journalism and its genres.

Special attention was given to the characterization of the Web public and factors for the news products rating. The study's objective was to assess ongoing evolutionary processes in the Internet amid the global development of the Web as well as to reveal major trends, social, economic, political, scientific and technological characteristics of the Web functioning as a stimulator of reaching the global electronic information market.

The dissertation's conclusions were used as a basis for the development of the Internet-related curricula designed for the students of the Mirzo Ulugbek National University and, also, for new disciplines like «The Internet as a Source of Journalists' Information and Mass Media », « The Internet and Multi-Media » and « Information Technologies and Journalism ».

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