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# MASS MEDIA IN KYRGYZSTAN HAS ITS VIRTUAL FUTURE

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**The traditional mass media in Kyrgyzstan fail to meet a public demand for information. The Internet media, under these circumstances, can become one of the main players on the information field of the country.**

The developing Kyrgyz Internet media may fill the information vacuum existing between the capital and the localities. Currently, the mass media market is shrinking due to its financial, technical problems, or court actions. In fact, out of 600 magazines and newspapers registered in this country, only 100 to 150 are actually published. A dozen of them seem to operate with profit and a mere two to three can boast of national coverage. A shortage of funds inhibits even the metropolitan print media from being distributed to other parts of the country, thus depriving them of information. "The press from Bishkek reaches us two to three days later", said Asel Moldokulova who lives in Osh, the main town in southern Kyrgyzstan. The TV and radio broadcast capacities are too limited to cover the entire country. The localities have to rely on the local publications, which are rather weak from a professional standpoint, or TV broadcasts by the public Kyrgyz and Russian channels. While the people in the capital or regional centres have access to the news sources covering this country and the rest of the world, the countryside appears to be totally deprived of the facility. Almaz Ismanov, a journalist from Osh, believes that "the development of the Internet media is the only solution today to get out of the current information deadlock and vacuum". However, this view tends to look at the Internet media future potential, rather than to portray the harsh reality of life.

## **NATION-WIDE COMPUTERIZATION**

Development of Internet media is part of the general IT development strategy. For a country with poor natural resources, that would be a way to address its burning information-related issues. To achieve the target, Kyrgyzstan has taken certain steps to expand the application of information technologies. These include a public computerised network, accomplished recently, a growing number of universities equipped with computers and access to the Internet, application of the Kyrgyz language for system software, etc. Despite the fact that the country's leadership made a commitment to develop telecommunications and information sectors, there are fears that the efforts may be thwarted by the domestic policy of the authorities. Lately, they seem to have ignored to guarantee the freedom of speech and the right of each individual to have free access to information. The Kyrgyz Ministry of Justice imposed a semi-annual moratorium on registration of mass media outlets. According to experts, the outlook for the implementation of IT development strategy in Kyrgyzstan, in general, is rather bleak. "There are already 12 governmental programs in the country which are not operating because they do not specify what should be expected from them", said Emil Alymkulov, head of KAPPA consultancy. "It is necessary to set clear targets for each stage and ways to achieve them".

## **WILL THE LAW BECOME HARSHER TOWARDS THE INTERNET?**

Recent events in Russia and Kazakhstan concerning mass media have echoed in Kyrgyzstan. Emerging political and economic elite groups have prompted reshaping in the local media market. *Vecherny Bishkek*, a daily in Russian with a wide circulation and good profits, has recently changed owners. According to certain opposition politicians and local experts, they are now the country president's family members. *Asaba*, a popular opposition newspaper, was declared bankrupt and shut down. Its former owner, Melis Eshimkanov, said the authorities made attempts to acquire the newspaper, but he resisted the pressure. The former journalists of *Vecherny Bishkek* are ready to establish a new publication and blame the officials in Kyrgyzstan, who spare no effort to oust media, which may affect public opinion, from the media market. Under the circumstances, Internet sites can be employed to publish materials that differ from that written in pro-governmental or pro-presidential publications. So far, no publication in the Internet sites originating in Kyrgyzstan had entailed any consequences for the authors. Jyrgalbek Kasabolotov, head of the analytical site [www.icb.kg](http://www.icb.kg), never had any censorship problems in regard to his Web-site publications. His editorial policy is based on the middle way principle, whereby the published items are unbiased and do not contain any sweeping criticism of the authorities. That accounts for the lack of any problems, believes Jyrgalbek. Local experts predict that, as soon as the importance of Web media in Kyrgyzstan reaches higher levels, the government is likely to build up regulatory pressure. At present, a search for legislation governing the Internet-related matters in Kyrgyzstan in the database of Toktom, the local legislative information company, produced no results.

Asia-Info, a local Internet provider, does not assume liability for the content of Web-sites, shifting it to its clients, as the Service Contract stipulates that the "client undertakes to comply with the current legislation of KR when using a data transmission network". In this manner, Asia-Info responded to the demand from the law enforcement authorities to remove information - whose publication breached current legislation - from some Web-sites. There was a case when the personal data concerning the staff of law enforcement and national security agencies were exhibited on the Internet. That exposure could have presented a danger to the personal security of those people. From now on, site authors will be held liable for publications placed on the Web. The identification of the authors, however, would be an almost impossible task to cope with. Probably parliamentary debates will be held soon in Kyrgyzstan to discuss the matters of public control over the Internet. These may result in decisions like those taken in Turkey, Kazakhstan or China, where the Web-sites criticising government were forced to close down, along with thousands of Internet cafés. Or, to have only a state-run provider, as it happened in Uzbekistan, would facilitate control for the authorities over access to, and contents of, Web-sites belonging to the local Internet community.

## **TEST OF STRENGTH**

A few years ago in Kyrgyzstan emerged the first Web-sites supported by such media as *Vecherny Bishkek*, *Delo No.*, *Res Publica*, *AKI-Press* and the state-run *Kabar News Agency*. Today, the site of ElCat, a Kyrgyz provider, features over 30 mass media links located in Kyrgyzstan. The on-line periodicals in Kyrgyzstan are in their embryo stage and cannot be regarded as fully-fledged media. "A handful of information sites is unable to carry much weight in this sector", said Meder Imakeyev, the author of *Burana Analytical Newsletter* ([www.burana.by.ru](http://www.burana.by.ru)). "The on-line media in Kyrgyzstan is in its adolescent period, testing its strength and looking for opportunities", concluded the authors of a site maintained by the Bishkek Chamber of Commerce and Industry ([www.bishkekchamber.kg](http://www.bishkekchamber.kg)). "Internet pages may just complement the traditional mass media, since the local Internet penetration is less than 1% of total population". Bolot Kurmanaliyev, one of the founders of the *Kyrgyznews* Group site (news on Kyrgyzstan in English), regards the development potential of Kyrgyzstan media on the Internet as enormous. Working in the financial sector in Germany, he was amazed at the deficiency of information on Kyrgyzstan. That fact triggered the creation of an on-line newsletter featuring main events in this country. To date, the

number of subscribers to Kyrgyznews has jumped from 30 to 300 people from various parts of the world. Mostly residents of USA, Russia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine visit the *Burana* site. However, information sites on Kyrgyzstan are seen as designated mainly for foreigners rather than for the local people.

### **CONDITIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNET MEDIA**

Internet visitors in Kyrgyzstan run up to 6,000 to 7,000 people out of the country's population of about 5 millions. Nurbek Turdukulov, president of Areopag Bishkek, explained that a drop in tariffs and a strengthening of competition would add to the expansion of the Internet industry market. At present, round-the-clock access to the Internet in Bishkek costs about US\$65 per month (the monthly average wage in the country is about US\$26). An Internet-café charges about US\$1 per hour. Though Internet users keep growing in number, they are still marked by a certain elitism. Among them are public servants, employees of international organisations, NGOs, students of some high schools, businessmen and well-off individuals. "A poor telecommunications infrastructure and high Internet access prices are key factors impeding the development of Internet media in Kyrgyzstan", said Bolot Kurmanaliyev. "The development level of national economy is directly linked to Internet media development. So far, the majority of population in Kyrgyzstan cannot afford the Internet services", concluded Almaz Ismanov. Internet providers making first efforts to penetrate the country are confronted with numerous technical problems. Internet users complain that getting connected to the Internet takes a lot of time, which is charged. Regional media are in no way represented among the Web resources of Kyrgyzstan. Nowadays, only Kyrgyzstan's metropolitan press can afford to create on-line pages. On an average, the annual budget of one site in Kyrgyzstan runs to about US\$10,000. This amount is too high for local mass media. The only media on the Web from the south of the country, Osh-Press, was closed down mainly for financial reasons. Most of the existing on-line periodicals are sponsored by international organisations such as Soros-Kyrgyzstan Foundation, Swiss Coordination Office for Development and Co-operation, and others. Not a single public media outlet, or that in the Kyrgyz language, has its own electronic page. At the same time, expenditures of paper editions lose to those of the electronic ones. Annual expenditures of a 16-page newspaper in A3 format, with a weekly circulation of 5,000 in Kyrgyzstan, amount to about US\$30,000. Slackening of business activity in Kyrgyzstan has slowed down the advertisement market. "Last year we paid about US\$3,000 for advertising in *Vecherny Bishkek*", said a representative of a Bishkek-based commercial company. "But, we think that the money was thrown down the drain. There is no use in advertising as long as the purchasing power of the public remains low." Newspaper business, being sensitive to retail sales and to receipts from advertising, is becoming non-profitable nowadays. But, there always exists a demand for news that is, at present, primarily met by the electronic media, including the Internet. And the present situation can trigger the expansion of the Internet media in Kyrgyzstan, both in quality and in quantity. A rise in the number of on-line sites may be accompanied by a parallel rise in the skills of journalists engaged in the Internet editions, a widening of the range of information services on the sites, and an increase in self reporting. All these improvements are presumably prompted by visitors from abroad who seem to be more demanding than the local people.