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BLOGGING DOWN THE DICTATOR?

The Kyrgyz Revolution and *Samizdat* Websites

Svetlana V. Kulikova and David D. Perlmutter

Abstract / This article evaluates the impact and significance of Akaevu.net, an advocacy blog that was linked to the recent ‘tulip revolution’ in Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet republic of Central Asia. The study assesses (1) to what extent do *samizdat* (that is, unofficial) blogs serve as sources of oppositional information for citizens of the nation as well as international observers and (2) what evidence is there of the effects of the *samizdat* blogs on political events, such as, in this case, the revolution itself? The authors found that the blog did indeed become a unique and rich source of information not available from other local sources or the world press. They suggest that *samizdat* blogs can serve to incite or sustain democratization in Third World countries, even those undergoing uneven economic development.

Keywords / blog / Internet / Kyrgyzstan / managed democracy / *samizdat* / ‘tulip revolution’ / weblogs

Introduction: People Power or Black Op?

Kyrgyzstan, a small country of 5 million people located in Central Asia, made the front page of print and web newspapers and the broadcast lead of the world media on 24 March 2005. On that day, President Askar Akayev, who had ruled the former Soviet republic for 14 years, fled the country after a series of large public protests, including one in which demonstrators seized the government building in the capital of Bishkek. As in many such events, narrative and causality were in the eye of the beholder. Western media, drawing parallels with democratic turns in the Republic of Georgia and Ukraine, initially described the events as a ‘tulip revolution’ (referring to the rare mountain flower held by protestors) enacted via ‘people power’ (*Christian Science Monitor*, 2005; *Herald Sun*, 2005; *The Houston Chronicle*, 2005; Williams, 2005). Other variations abound. The fall of the Kyrgyz leader was deemed a ‘garden-variety’ coup (Burkett, 2005; Smith, 2005), a ‘scary democratic rebellion’ (Sullivan, 2005), and even a CIA black-op (Laughland, 2005; Spencer, 2005).

Russian pro-government media labeled the events in Kyrgyzstan a US-backed coup, a ‘sandpaper revolution’ (Yuferova, 2005), and an unconstitutional ousting of Askar Akayev, creator of ‘the most liberal regime in Central Asia’ (Leontiev, 2005), while the independent media portrayed the leader’s departure as a case of

'democratic barbarianism against civilized authoritarianism' (Panfilova et al., 2005). The media in the neighboring Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – ruled by similarly oppressive regimes – either ignored the fall of the strongman or condemned it, putting the main emphasis on the night of looting following the revolution. The message delivered to their populations was: 'Don't try this here!' Most of the domestic media in Kyrgyzstan were in a difficult position when reporting the events of 24 March, as no one knew whether the president was still in the country. State-controlled media, confused as to who was in charge, produced unreliable and erroneous accounts,¹ which forced many people to search for alternative sources of information, often Internet-based.

The motivations behind the downfall of the self-styled 'true democrat' will probably not become clear for years. Kyrgyzstan, however, faces a number of challenges to becoming anything approximating a democracy: a weak tradition of free elections and civil society; a population long reared either in Soviet totalitarianism or tribal paternalism; regional divisions and unrest; a possible Islamic insurgency that reflects more frustrations with secular political alternatives than any true turn to fundamentalism; huge gaps between the super wealthy (often members of a few families like that of Akayev) and the impoverished masses; and an education system that reflects the worst of the last days of the Soviet regime.

Perhaps most challenging of all, Kyrgyzstan's mass media, until recently, were largely controlled by the ruling elite. Anti-government voices could only be heard or read from two opposition newspapers, *Moya Stolitsa-Novosti* (*MSN*) and *Res Publica*. It was widely suspected that these tribunes of anti-Akayev sentiment were allowed to exist so that the strongman could point them out to westerners as examples of press 'freedom'. The other avenue of opposition expression – until the street protests – was the Internet. Those who had web access could obtain information on Kyrgyzstan from the websites of the opposition newspapers *MSN* <www.msn.kg>, *Res Publica* <www.respublica.kg>, and those of NGOs and political movements, such as the Coalition of NGOs for Democracy and Civil Society and the youth movement 'Birge', the popular online newspaper *Gazeta.kg* <www.gazeta.kg> and the website *Kyrgyz.us* <www.kyrgyz.us>, targeted at Kyrgyzstanians residing abroad. However, since the controversial parliamentary elections in February 2005 a team of hackers hired by pro-government interests have regularly blocked access to and hacked into the content of these sites.

Sources such as *Gazeta.kg* and *Kyrgyz.us*, in a land where almost all information was controlled by the government or its allies, present a sort of virtual *samizdat*, the name given, in the Soviet era, to unofficial, self-published opposition writings. In the 1970s, *samizdat* was spread via mimeograph machines and briefcases. Today, however, oppositional literature is largely an incarnation of the Internet. The 'how' and 'why' and 'with what effect' of such a phenomenon is of great interest. As Barber et al. (1997: 17) argue, the convergence of democracy and technology is the most important question facing society. We may add that it is also an applied question: how we as individuals, not students of either the political order or of new media, can understand what people are actually doing with technology to push political transformation. The issue is complicated because, as discussed later,

repressive governments are generally not unaware of the bloggers: they employ their own technology (filters, hacking) as well as old-fashioned strong-arm tactics to silence blogs. China and Iran, for example, are increasingly sophisticated in their blocking and filtering of objectionable content, with the assistance of western software providers. Neither nation is averse to censorship methods such as tossing suspected bloggers or webmasters in jail.

This article attempts to evaluate the impact and significance of Akaevu.net <www.akaevu.net>,² an advocacy blog created by the author of Gazeta.kg and Kyrgyz.us as a temporary solution to deliver information to the people who could not access the blocked and hacked sites. We try to address the following questions:

1. To what extent do *samizdat* blogs serve as legitimate sources of oppositional information for citizens of the nation as well as international observers?
2. What content is available in *samizdat* blogs that differentiates them from oral, written or other sources of unofficial information?
3. What content is available in *samizdat* blogs that differentiates them from what newsreaders may learn from traditional outsider media, such as international newspapers or television news?
4. What evidence is there of the effects of the *samizdat* blogs on political events, such as, in this case, the revolution itself?
5. To what extent can *samizdat* blogs serve to incite or sustain democratization in Third World countries? If so, must the democracy model follow western patterns?

At first glance, the weblog would seem to be the loneliest form of opposition in a Central Asian republic where computer access and Internet use can be counted in single digits for a poor rural population (Dimitrova and Beilock, 2005). But in revolutions, sheer numbers are not the main guarantor of success or failure. A few thousand Bolsheviks, for example, were able to seize Russia in 1917, whereas millions of protestors could not move the Chinese government in 1989. Indeed, in the Kyrgyzstan case, only about a thousand demonstrators actually took over the government building and sent the president packing (BBC, 2005).

While no direct link exists between blogs and the fall of the president, in this article we want to explore the role of the blog in the Kyrgyz opposition and, more specifically, in covering the revolution itself. We argue that Third World blogs can be a significant producer, collector, sifter, distributor and exhibitor of information. In addition, for fast-moving events occurring in a world news economy that increasingly precludes staffing correspondents in 'out of the way' nations, the blog can also 'scoop' international media.

Can Democracy be Transferred – by Blog?

Here we speculate whether the blog may serve as a training ground or mechanism in creating alternative communities of opposition. Blogs may be online journals, but in terms of participative association they are equivalent to the tavern meeting groups of pre-revolutionary America and the reading clubs and salons of pre-revolutionary

France. Those individuals who tend to participate in revolutions, ranging from students to technicians to intellectuals, not only can communicate with each other but have access to a vast realm of information outside the official content. In numbers, the rise of blogs is indeed impressive: there may be as many as 10–50 million blogs (Riley, 2005), with up to 300,000 new ones being created each day (Johnson, 2005). According to a Pew study, '44% of [American] Internet users have created content for the online world through building or posting to Web sites, creating blogs, and sharing files' (Lenhart et al., 2004). According to a *Wall Street Journal*/Harris poll of 13 April 2005, two-fifths of Americans who are online have read a political blog, and more than a quarter read them once a month or more.

Blogs like Andrew Sullivan <www.andrewsullivan.com/index.php>, Talking Points Memo <www.talkingpointsmemo.com>, Instapundit <www.instapundit.com>, Little greenfootballs <littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog>, Daily Kos <www.dailykos.com> and Wonkette <www.wonkette.com> have risen to the status of newspapers of record, both being the subject of mainstream media news stories and driving them (as in Dan Rather's 'memogate'). Blogs have also been global news leaders and innovators. For example, the tsunami/earthquake of December 2004 was followed by a wake of blogs that allowed people to search for loved ones, post messages announcing their survival and even see video of the disaster (Barkham, 2004). As O'Grady notes,

Fourteen years ago, during the first Gulf War, CNN became the primary source for breaking stories, changing how news was presented and ending the supremacy of traditional networks such as the BBC and NBC. Now the Asian tsunami looks like it's becoming a similar landmark for the weblogs . . . and CNN is among the dinosaurs. (O'Grady, 2005)

Even in nations where they are actively politically repressed, blogs can constitute a political factor. For example, as of spring 2005, there were over 100,000 Iranian blogs (Siamdoust, 2005). Many reflect deep antipathy to the *mullah* and the conservative regime. In response, the Iranian government has hacked into, blocked and filtered many blogs and arrested a number of prominent bloggers. On the other hand, blogs have been used to call attention to political repression. One arrested Iranian blogger was released, in part due to a blog-driven protest campaign and petition (Glaser, 2004). Many international non-governmental organizations have also tried to raise the profile of the voices of the developing world. Harvard's Global Voices Project <cyber.law.harvard.edu/globalvoices/> surveys blogs around the world, from Guillermo <sine-metu.blogspot.com/2005/05/hacking-for-k.html> to The Dumb North African <www.mindbleed.com> to CongoGirl <www.livejournal.com/users/congogirl> to Peking Duck <pekingduck.org> to Fist-Full-of-Euros <fistfulofeuros.net> to, astoundingly, the quasi-blog of deposed Cambodian King Sihanouk <www.norodomsihanouk.info>.

Other variations of democratic empowerment abound. Ohmynews is a Korean-based site that permits anyone to post news and commentary; if their work is popular enough the contributors are paid. Blogs even allow people who live under regimes that restrict political expression to voice 'opposition' commentary via circuitous channels: metaphor and imagery. The winner of the 2004 International

Blog of the Year Award was a Chinese blog <www.18mo.com> published by a man whose pseudonym in Chinese characters means 'angry little snake', which is devoted to *dogs*; to wit, the site offers pictures and stories about dogs all over the world. The Germans who awarded the prize, however, insisted that the 'dog newspaper' was a masterpiece of political allegory, an online Animal Farm from a country that strictly censors Internet content and access. Another Chinese blog, or 'photolog' <www.ziboy.com>, seems to comment via pictures alone on the politics of life in the 'People's' Republic.

What role do blogs such as these play in struggles over democratic transformation? The status of the blog, whatever its origin or purpose as an expression of individuality, is significant. As one writer has noted, 'The weblog is a malleable and fluid medium through which individuals can develop an individualized voice that can reflect facets of their personal style and idiosyncratic intellectual approaches' (Oravec, 2002: 614). But do ordinary people in developing (or undeveloping) countries have time for idiosyncratic intellectuality and its expression? Obviously, illiterate farmers with hungry mouths to feed are not blogging. As Roger Hurwitz has argued, 'The Internet's diffusion has increased the opportunities for political action among those who are already the most politically active and informed' (Hurwitz, 1999: 656). Does this cohort, however, constitute a potential source of oppositional leadership, and the development of collective associations of democracy-building? Blogs are for people with something to say to the world *and* the means to say it through a new medium. In countries like Kyrgyzstan, only a few thousand people make up such a 'guild' – but that's enough for a revolution.

Background: 'Whatsistan'?

Kyrgyzstan gained its independence in 1991, as a result of the breakdown of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Similar to the other Central and Eastern European countries and former Soviet republics, Kyrgyzstan declared democracy as its final goal in development by defining itself as 'a sovereign, unitary, democratic republic constructed on the basis of a legal secular state'.³ The outcomes for the various new nations, however, have been quite different. According to a special Freedom House report on the countries in transition, *Nations in Transit* (Freedom House, 2004b), of the 15 former Soviet republics only the three Baltic states achieved the goal and became members of the European Union, while others lag considerably behind, either recovering from having shaken off the newer authoritarian regimes (the Ukraine and Georgia), or sliding even deeper into autocracy (Russia) if not already there (Belarus, Turkmenistan).

To evaluate the state of freedom in these countries, Freedom House uses a typology ranging from a consolidated democracy to a consolidated authoritarian regime (see Figure 1A in the Appendix). Country assessments are based on the state of political rights and civil liberties during the year assessed. Most of the countries in transit fall into the big 'partly free' zone that encompasses semi-consolidated democracies, hybrid regimes, and semi-consolidated autocracies, all of which combine the elements of both democratic and authoritarian forms of governance

at varying degrees and levels. The ideal movement is toward a consolidated democracy, which Linz and Stepan (2001: 94–5) define as having attitudinal, behavioral and constitutional aspects of governance and requiring at least three prerequisites: (1) *stateness*, i.e. a strong, confident government resting on the majority's support and rule of law; (2) *completed democratic transition* with fair and contested elections and efficient and separated executive, judicial and legislative powers; and (3) *culture of democratic governance*, wherein the rulers observe the constitution and rights of individuals and minorities, respect the legislature and tolerate criticism and pluralism of opinions.

As of January 2005, Kyrgyzstan was still considered to be in transition, even though the pattern of the last five years showed that the country was sliding toward a consolidated authoritarian regime, the exact opposite of a consolidated democracy. In 2001, Kyrgyzstan entered the 'not free' area (Freedom House, 2001–4) and remained there until recently. The downgrading in assessment was based on several important events and processes: (1) the highly controversial 1999 parliamentary elections, where numerous instances of fraud were reported but never admitted or recognized by the government; (2) the presidential election of 2000, when President Askar Akayev enabled his running for an unconstitutional third term by having the Constitutional Court invalidate his first term of 1990–5 because he had been appointed by the parliament and approved by a national referendum instead of being elected by a popular vote; (3) the highly manipulated 2003 national referendum that approved constitutional amendments to provide immunity to the president and his family and a new parliamentary reform (OSCE, 2003); (4) the high rates of corruption at all levels of government described in the special Freedom House (2004a) report *Countries at the Crossroads*; and (5) the Akayevs' successful acquisition of most media assets between 1991 and 2004. According to some estimates, the family owned or controlled up to 80 percent of all media outlets and production facilities such as printing houses and distribution services (Kulikova and Ibraeva, 2002: 15–17).

In short, Kyrgyzstan's political leadership adopted the philosophy of *managed democracy*. The origin of the term is difficult to trace but is most widely attributed to General Suharno's Indonesia. Managed democracy can be described as a regime with formal democratic institutions such as regular contested elections and other forms of popular participation like referenda, diverse and private press and developed civil liberties such as freedom to travel. At the same time, this type of regime is authoritarian in essence as it allows limited autonomy for democratic institutions (Pribylovsky, 2005). President Akayev's government embraced the concept after it was revived by Russia with Putin's rise to power in the early 2000s.⁴ Papp (2005) suggests that Chair of the Effective Politics Foundation Gleb Pavlovsky, the Kremlin's key political strategist, and Director of the Political Research Institute Sergei Markov are the main ideologists of the managed democracy in Russia. This assertion is also supported by the fact that Pavlovsky labeled the March 2005 events in Kyrgyzstan, which marked the failure of managed democracy, as 'a grave political catastrophe' that threatened the 'entire architecture of security in the region' (Interfax, 2005).

The Kyrgyzstan of the later years of Akayev's presidency is a typical example of this managed democracy model: the elections are regular and contested but manipulated so skillfully that even outside observers cannot confirm fraud; political parties do exist but have little influence on the actual legislative process because the candidates prefer to run on an individual rather than a party ticket; more than 500 media outlets are registered with the Ministry of Justice but only about 150–80 operate in the entire country at any given point of time; there are more than 3000 registered NGOs, many of which are quasi-NGOs created by pro-government circles to channel the grant money. At the same time, the citizens are free in their consciousness (religion), thinking, expression and travel within and outside the country.

According to the democratic theory, such a visible discrepancy between what is allowed to individual citizens in terms of civil liberties and the abridged political rights and exercise thereof should inevitably result in a tension between the two (Dahl, 1971). In an effort to establish balance, the government can either extend political rights or put more controls on civil liberties. The government of Kyrgyzstan cherished its image of the most democratic society in Central Asia and could not afford to curtail civil liberties, which were the only true and tangible remnants of democracy. However, the worsening economic situation and low popularity of President Akayev have widened the gap. The disparity became even more pronounced when the government devised an elaborate scheme of maintaining the power within the family based on the 2003 constitutional amendments that called for a new one-chamber parliament. The plan included the following:

1. Creating a new broad-based party, *Alga, Kyrgyzstan!* ('Go Forward, Kyrgyzstan!') that would provide the base for loyal nominees to the 2005 parliament;
2. Electing the new one-chamber parliament in February 2005 that would include *Alga, Kyrgyzstan!* members and other people trusted by the family, including the president's son, Aidar Akayev, and daughter, Bermet Akayeva, who is also one of the party leaders;
3. Collecting 300,000 signatures from citizens for the people's legislative initiative – a national referendum calling for an extension of President Akayev's term until at least 2008;
4. Conducting the referendum, manipulating its results if necessary; and
5. Prolonging the president's term of office by parliament's validation of the referendum.

The plan was followed through only to the second step. When the party *Alga, Kyrgyzstan!* was being formed, opposition media reported on the aggressive methods of recruiting, including bribery and threats to potential constituents. At the second step, however, this became even more obvious and the numerous violations of registration of candidates for the parliamentary elections could not be ignored. Prior to the elections, citizens in the northern region of Naryn and southern regions of Jalal-Abad and Osh organized protests because the candidates they wanted to see in the parliament were being refused registration. However, the government insisted that such refusals were justified.

After the first round of elections on 27 February 2005, opposition parties and organizations such as Interbilim and the Coalition of NGOs reported numerous electoral violations and vote rigging. In several contested constituencies, it was decided to repeat the elections at the time of run-offs, on 13 March 2005. When the rerun elections revealed the same fraud and pressure on voters, the people in the most impoverished areas of the Osh region in the south organized protests and demonstrations, which after the government's attempts to suppress them flared up into popular uprisings and what is referred to as the exercising of the 'people's power', i.e. the people ousting local state administration and making decisions through people's councils and involving more and more citizens in the opposition movement.

By 21 March, the opposition controlled all of the southern regions of Osh and Jalal-Abad and a substantial part of Naryn in the north, with protests being organized in other northern regions, with the exception of Bishkek (Kimmage, 2005). Soon, the demands of the opposition included not only the invalidation of the parliamentary elections but also the resignation of President Akayev. Organized groups of people started to move from Osh and Jalal-Abad to Bishkek, and on 23 March Bishkek saw its first large protest. The government used the police force against the demonstrators and about 500 participants were arrested, including activists of the Kel-Kel and Birge youth movements, as well as journalists and political leaders. The next day, a larger, peaceful demonstration of about 10,000 people gathered in the central square of Bishkek. It culminated in the takeover of the government building and President Akayev's fleeing to Moscow. He ultimately resigned on 4 April 2005, and one of the leaders of the revolution, Kurmanbek Bakiev, was elected as the new president in the 10 July 2005 elections.

Analyzing the causes of Kyrgyzstan's revolution, Kimmage cites the following:

... [a] widespread perception that the Akayev government was massively corrupt, that the distribution of whatever economic benefits had accrued to Kyrgyzstan in the post-Soviet period was grossly inequitable, that the Akayev-led ruling elite was actively manipulating the mechanisms of democracy in order to prolong its rule, and that the state-controlled media were distorting the real situation in the country. (Kimmage, 2005)

This is a particularly important development, because one of the most significant features of managed democracy is control over information. In Russia, it is being done through the bifurcation between the print and electronic media, i.e. effective government control over television while allowing for diversity of newspapers and magazines in terms of both ownership and content (Becker, 2004: 150–2).

In Kyrgyzstan, the president's family achieved control through ownership of mainstream media and production facilities. The first cracks appeared when the US and Norwegian government-sponsored Media Support Center opened a printing house in November 2003, which began to print opposition newspapers. By March 2004, the Center was printing over 90 papers, about 30 of which were in opposition to the government. Earlier, such periodicals either did not exist or had been printed at the state printing house, Uchkun, which could and often did refuse its printing services under various pretexts (for examples, see Kulikova and Ibraeva, 2002). As soon as the independent newspapers could use this new production

facility, their circulations shot up, as did their influence. In the aftermath, President Akayev made a direct connection between the printing house and the coup. The American media also assessed the printing house and independent newspapers as instrumental in the revolution (Associated Press, 2005).

While, from late 2003, newspapers were presenting a challenge for the family-run political regime, the Internet was proving an even greater danger. President Akayev, as a trained scientist, always pointed out the importance of quality education and modern information technologies, which resulted in mushrooming universities and a quickly developing Internet. Indeed, Kyrgyzstan led other Central Asian republics in the development of the Internet, which lag tremendously behind the Eastern European countries (Dimitrova and Beilock, 2005: 175–6). According to the Reporters Without Borders 2004 report 'Enemies of the Internet', the number of Internet users in the other four Central Asian republics varies within 0.5 to 3 percent of the population, while in Kyrgyzstan it is 10–12 percent (RWB, 2004). One of the two major Internet service providers in Kyrgyzstan, AsialInfo, reports that the number of users in 2004 exceeded 500,000, which is consistent with the RWB data. Most of the users are state and private company employees or students who have Internet access at work or school,⁵ which explains why the number of visits to popular sites drops during the weekends.

Despite official statements on the necessity to develop the Internet as a way to achieve openness and prosperity, the Kyrgyz government did make attempts to control it, especially during the 2005 parliamentary elections. Understanding that Internet content cannot be restricted, the government attempted to control access by blocking or hacking into the opposition sites, first the newspapers *Moya Stolitsa-Novosti* <www.msn.kg>, *Res Publica* <www.respublica.kg>, and the online newspaper *Gazeta.kg* <www.gazeta.kg>, all hosted by AsialInfo (Kyrgyzinfo, 2005). The administrators of *Gazeta.kg*, the second most popular site in Kyrgyzstan after the commercial news agency AKI-Press <www.akipress.org>, developed a creative way of solving the problem: starting the advocacy blog *Akaevu.net* (Introweb, 2005).

Akaevu.net as an Advocacy Blog

History and Mission

Akaevu.net was created as a temporary stop gap for the blocked sites *Gazeta.kg* and *Kyrgyz.us*. The advocacy character of the blog is indicated in its name ('*Akaevu net*' in Russian means 'Down with Akayev') and explicitly stated in the passionate and aggressive opening editorial by its author, Ulan Melisbek, a Kyrgyz citizen currently residing in the US:

As a result of the foul order by the Akayev-Toigonbaev gang, the most popular sites of Kyrgyzstan, Gazeta.kg and Kyrgyz.us, have been blocked. Access is also blocked to the popular regional resource Centrasia.ru, which is also covering the events in our country. Our response to [these] Chamberlains-Akayevs will be the creation of innumerable sites on various servers, so that they shake up the financial position of Toigonbaev [Akayev's son-in-law]. Hackers are people who value their time and skills, and sooner or later Toigonbaev will become weary of paying for blockage of numerous sites.

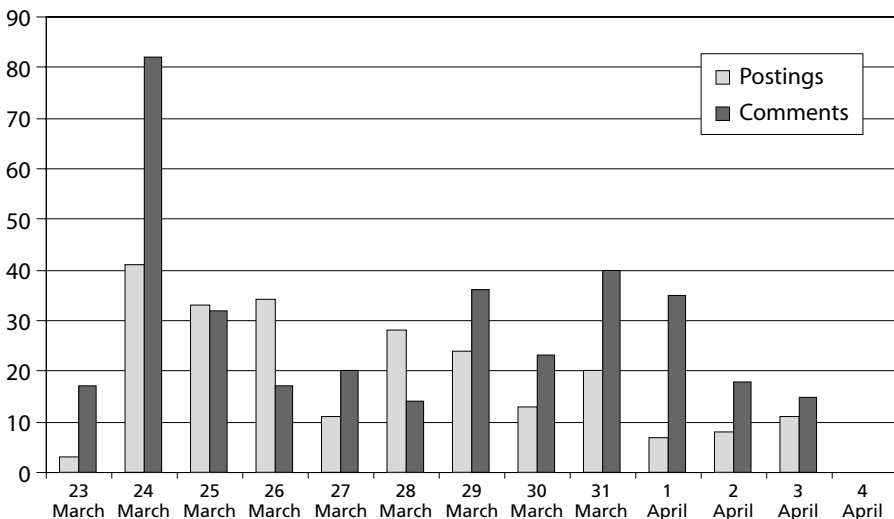
Akaevu.net was registered on the Russian segment of the Internet, on one of the largest platforms in Russia, with the 'mail.ru' domain address. This placement turned out to be in the blog's favor for two reasons: (1) the Russian Internet is much smaller than that of the US or European countries, not content-wise but in terms of audiences (Gorny, 2003), which allowed the blog to quickly reach one of the highest positions among political sites in Russian cyberspace; and (2) registered in Russia, the site was hosted in and administered from the US, which significantly reduced the opportunity to hack into it.

Akaevu.net started to operate on 23 March, just one day before the revolution, and from the outset positioned itself as 'a trumpet of the Kyrgyz revolution', whose mission is to provide up-to-the-minute information on the current political situation in Kyrgyzstan.

Content and Visibility

On its first day the blog carried three stories: advocacy materials generated by the bloggers and news on protests organized by Kyrgyzstanians in other countries. From the day of the revolution, the blog reoriented itself to carrying the stories from other mainstream media and websites, oftentimes just as they had been published or with a short comment by the bloggers. To understand the nature of the posts and readers' comments, a simple content analysis was done for the period 23 March–4 April 2005 (the date of the official announcement of Akayev's resignation). The number of stories within the selected period shows that they generally declined from a high of 41 on the day of the revolution, 24 March, to 0 on 4 April, when the blog announced its mission accomplished (see Figure 1; see also Table 1A with actual values in the Appendix).

FIGURE 1
Number of Postings and Comments on Akaevu.net by Date



As Figure 1 illustrates, there is no direct correlation between the number of posts and the number of comments to the posts. In fact, on some dates the total number of comments was two to three times higher than the number of posts, while on other dates the reverse was true. The number of comments per post varied from 0 to 22, with no distinguishable pattern. The only predictable indicator of the number of comments per post seems to be whether or not the post was focused on President Akayev or his family. Such posts generally provoked heated discussions in the comments area. For example, the post of 31 March, which provided an interview with Bermet Akayeva from the Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* titled 'I Left Bishkek in What I Was Wearing – Jeans and Sweater', had the highest number of comments (22) for the period analyzed. All of the comments were highly critical of Akayeva and her attempts to present her father and her family as victims. Another example was an interview with Akayev himself on the Russian radio station Ekho Moskvyy on 30 March, which provoked one neutral and 11 highly negative comments.

Most of the stories in the sample are materials from other media and websites. Some of them appeared within 30 minutes after they had been published by the original source, which suggests that several bloggers were monitoring the net at the same time and posted what they could find immediately. The bloggers must have had direct access to one of Akayev's longest-standing political opponents, Felix Kulov, who had been in jail before the revolution for five years. On 24 March, when Kulov was released, Akaevu.net was the only site that carried an exclusive, 30 minutes in advance announcement of his first appearance on television. This resulted in a higher visibility of the site, as the announcement was picked up and carried further by other major domestic and Russian media and websites citing Akaevu.net as source.

Another factor that increased the blog's visibility on the net was, on 24 March, an erroneous report of Akayev's resignation attributed to Euronews TV. This one-line announcement, which literally read 'Euronews Has Just Reported that Akayev Resigned', was picked up by so many sites and online media in Russia and nearby countries (e.g. news sites Utro.ru, Polit.ru, Sistema.ru, Russian newspaper *Novye Izvestiya*, Ukrainian newspaper *Tribuna*) that Euronews had to officially reject the information. The story was repeated almost identically on 2 April, however, when Akayev did indeed resign and Euronews reported on it. This interaction with the mainstream media is in line with the phenomenon that Fortunati (2005) calls the 'mediatization of the Internet and internetization of the media' – mutual sharing of information between the traditional media and their online versions and other Internet sites, and popular blogs in particular.

The original source determined the characterization of stories. When placing the posts, the bloggers categorized and labeled them in four groups:

1. *Foreign media* covering Kyrgyzstan (e.g. CNN, BBC, Reuters). Most of the stories in this category are in English or in both English and Russian.
2. *Kyrgyz media* covering local events and providing local experts' analysis. The posts in this category were drawn from both mainstream and oppositional newspapers, *Moya Stolitsa-Novosti* and *Res Publica* in particular, and the major news agencies, AKI-Press, Kabar and Kyrgyzinfo.

3. *Russian media* carrying stories on the revolution and its implications for Russian politics and policies in the region. The spectrum of media in this category is impressive: news agencies ITAR-TASS, Interfax, RIA-Novosti and online Lenta.ru; newspapers *Kommersant*, *Novaya Gazeta*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, *Vremya Novostei*; the radio station Ekho Moskv; and various news and political analysis sites such as Polit.ru, Utro.ru, Kreml.ru, Dni.ru, Fergana.ru, Strana.ru, and Gazeta.ru.
4. *Proprietary materials* – posts generated by the advocacy group itself, mostly petitions or analysis and alternative interpretations of other media stories.

Clear evidence of the blog's anti-Akayev stance is that, of all 143 posts in the sample mentioning Akayev and his family, almost half – 60 – are negative, 66 have a neutral tone, eight are mixed and only nine are positive. Moreover, the nine posts that tried to present Akayev positively were either interviews with him and his daughter Bermet or stories written by their political consultants and Russian or Uzbek political analysts who believed Akayev to be democratic. Many of these posts were accompanied by a sarcastic subhead, such as 'Akayev Wants to Return Home Clean and Rosy' or 'Akayev is Searching for Scapegoats to Blame'. Most of them also provoked a high number of comments, between nine and 22, of a highly negative tone, and sometimes including direct threats.

On 4 April, the only post on the blog was the message that announced the advocacy goals of the blog fulfilled:

www.akaevu.net has accomplished its mission. Today we can say with certainty that there is no more place for Akayev in the political life of Kyrgyzstan. We are happy that we were able to deliver for you the needed, interesting and up to date information at the most difficult times for all of us. We are glad that we made our contribution into the coverage of events in Kyrgyzstan during these days. We were carrying out our civic duty. Stay tuned! [Signed] Kyrgyz.us, Gazeta.kg, Kyrgyzcha.org – team of Akaevu.net.

On 5 April, the blog resumed placement of posts, but their number never reached the same level. The total number of stories placed between 6 and 15 April is 21, and on 12–14 April and 16–24 April no new posts were placed in the 'news' section, even though visitors could still participate in the interactive poll and leave comments on the old posts. On 25 April, the blog address was redirected to Gazeta.kg, marking the end of the Akaevu.net era in the blogosphere.

Design and Navigation

When the blog appeared, Russian newspaper *Kommersant* praised its design innovation, which included a big orange banner with the slogan 'Long Live the Kyrgyz People that Dethroned the Villain Akayev!', as well as a large collection of photos and interactive polls (4 April 2005). The site was indeed easy to navigate, well organized and provided numerous opportunities for feedback. The home page carried a selection of key stories starting 23 March 2005. The rest of the stories

were catalogued by date and could be accessed through the archive calendar in the upper right-hand corner of the screen. The blog had a counter of visitors and the counter of hits for each story. Some stories were complemented with video and audio materials that could be downloaded.

The following opportunities for feedback and involvement were available to the site visitors.

Comment on Stories

Each story had a window for comment with the default identification as 'guest' and default subject matter as the story title. This means that those who wanted to comment needed only to type up their message if they did not wish to disclose their identity. This feature sparked a debate later on in the blog about whether people should be allowed to comment without identification because many commentators abused their anonymity and resorted to rough language and sometimes direct threats to authors and other commentators. However, no general agreement was reached on the identity issue among those who participated in this debate.

Comment on the Blog

A separate section for general comments on the blog, titled 'Testimonials of our Visitors', was listed in the left-hand bar menu of the home page.

Forum Participation or Observation

The forum had three main sections: 'News', 'Politics' and 'Looting', with several subcategories in each. The forum did not require those who wanted to leave comments to register or provide their identity. This option, again, resulted in numerous anonymous and 'guest' comments, which sparked controversy among forum participants even though it made participation easier and safer.

Voting in the Blog's Public Opinion Poll

There were a total of four interactive polls: 'Should Akayev be Impeached or Given the Status of First President with all Privileges?', 'Who Should be the Next President of the Kyrgyz Republic?', 'What Should We Do with the Akayevs?' and 'Should Force be Used to Calm Down Osh and Jalal-Abad?' Blog visitors could vote and view the results, with statistics and graphs immediately on the site. The second poll was the most popular, having collected almost 1000 votes and over 250 comments.

Subscription to the Listserve

This function provided alerts on newly released stories. According to the blog, the listserv had more than 4000 subscribers.

Viewing, Contribution to and Evaluation of Photographs of Events

Images are categorized as under Bishkek, Osh, Looting and Occasional. The gallery had a meter for the most frequently viewed photographs and a 'star' system for their evaluation.

Email

Email contact was available for contribution of stories, photographs, comments, signing petitions and providing suggestions. The email address was indicated on the home page.

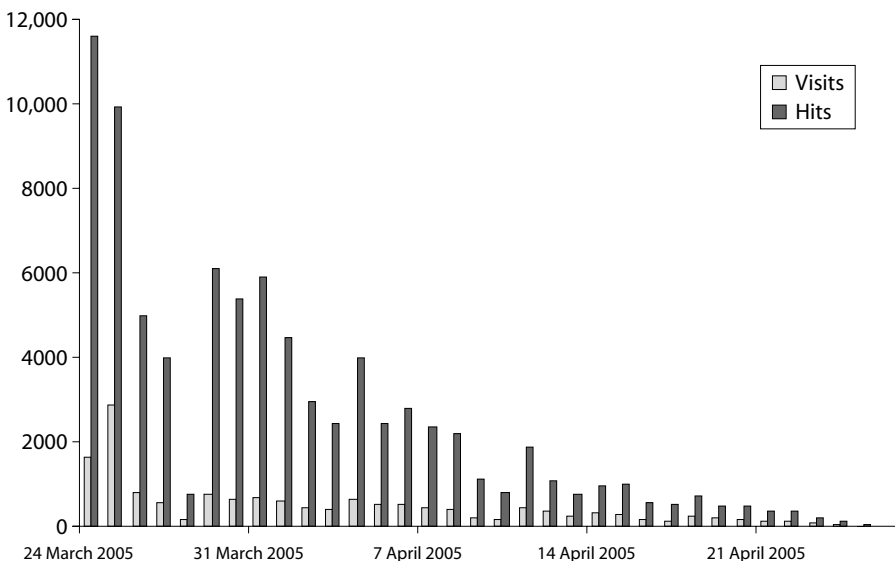
Useful Links

Additional information could be sought from the recommended sites of *Moya Stolitsa-Novosti*, *Res Publica*, the political party Ar-Namys, the youth movement Kel-Kel, Birge's Citizen Campaign, the Youth Movement for Democracy and Kyrgyz.us.

Audiences and Impact

From the rating tables and visit dynamic analysis available through <www.top.mail.ru> when the blog was active, some patterns could be observed and accurate assumptions made about the blog audiences. Figure 2 presents the number of visits and hits during the entire life of the blog.

FIGURE 2
Number of Visits and Hits to Akaevu.net



As the figure shows, the largest number of hits – over 11,500 – fell on the day of the revolution, when the blog had the largest number of posts. Also, during the revolution, cell phones experienced transmission problems and many young people used the Internet to send messages to their friends and to exchange news. They spontaneously formed three forums that posted the most current information: one on Diesel, the forum platform of the second biggest Internet provider, Elcat, one on Akaevu.net and one on the site of the Birge movement. They were used at various times, and Akaevu.net had the clear advantage of being hosted in the US when overload occurred and the sites in Kyrgyzstan were not accessible.

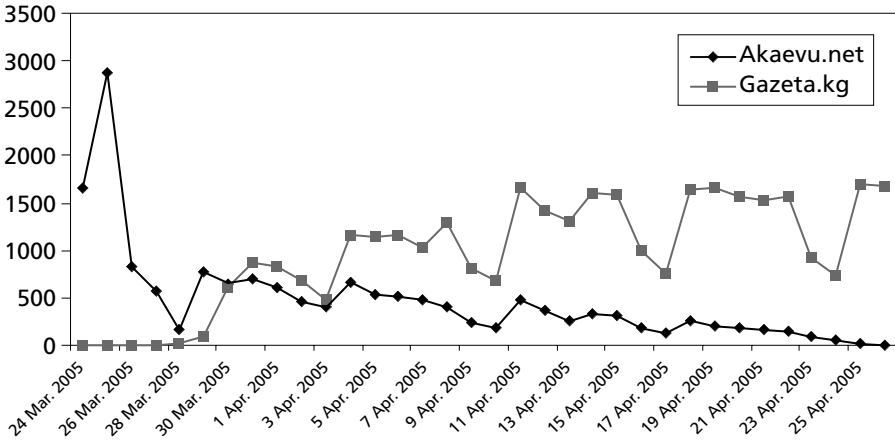
The high number of visits and hits on 24–25 March can be explained by several contributing factors, some of which have been touched upon already: (1) the novelty of the blog and the news of its appearance on major Russian news sources; (2) the catchy address of the blog created interest; (3) links to the blog from other major sites that picked up the Euronews-attributed erroneous story on Akayev's resignation and that provided the link or the name of the blog as a reference; (4) interaction of the blog with the other two forums, Diesel and Birge; (5) absence of coverage by other outlets of the night of looting, when the only way to find out what was going on was to follow one of these three forums. The extreme popularity of the blog and demand for its information propelled it to the 31st, 18th and then 4th place among the most popular political blogs on the Russian Internet on the first day, first night (the looting) and second day respectively of its existence.

However, after the first two days, the interest in events in Kyrgyzstan decreased and a significant part of the audience, especially from Russia and other neighboring countries, stopped visiting the site. The number of visitors dropped continuously after 5 April, when the news of Akayev's resignation became universally known. Some of the visitors may have switched to Gazeta.kg and Kyrgyz.us after the 4 April 'mission accomplished' announcement, which explains the slight increase in visits to Gazeta.kg during the week of 4 April, and on April 25, when the remaining 50 faithful visitors to Akaevu.net were redirected to Gazeta.kg (Figure 3).

Figure 4 demonstrates the geographic dynamic of visits. Only four countries were selected from the list of geographic locations because they represent the highest concentration of visitors, while other countries on the list represented a handful, sometimes only one visitor. Such countries include Great Britain, Kazakhstan, Turkey, China, Belgium, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Italy, Australia, Ukraine, Georgia, Iran, Belarus, South Korea, Norway, Spain, Japan and others – 28 in total (see Table 2A in the Appendix for data from 25 March). Both the spread and the number of visitors suggest that the site was highly popular among Kyrgyzstanians living abroad, especially students studying in various schools around the world. This finding is also consistent with the identification of comments; whenever the comments were signed, the writer was always either a student or graduate.

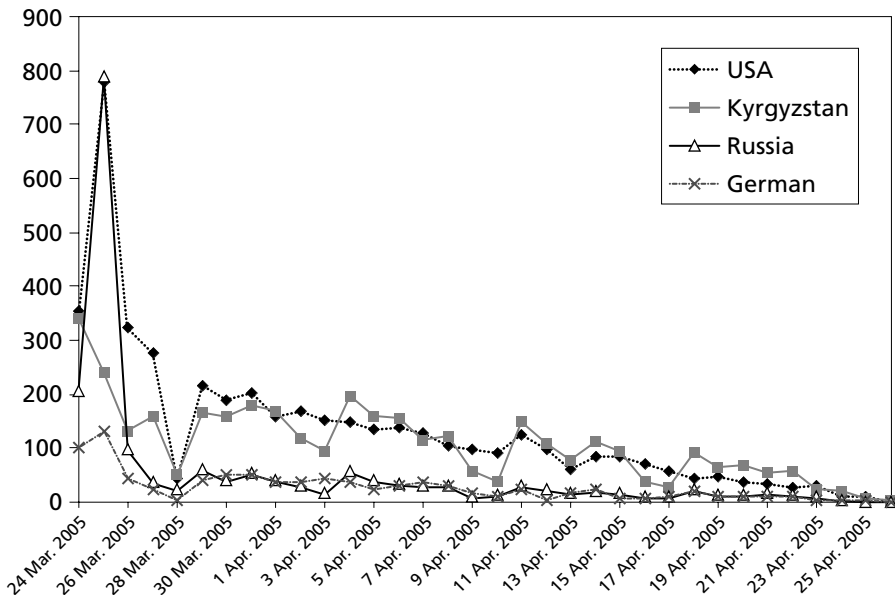
The second largest category of people consisted of media professionals, political scientists and other experts, who expected to find the most up-to-date information from the original source. The dissemination of the exclusive announcement about Kulov's television interview and the hoax of Akayev's resignation story attributed to Euronews supports this idea. Finally, there were a number of comments

FIGURE 3
Comparison of Visits to Akaevu.net and Gazeta.kg



posted about anti-Akayev stories, in particular suggesting that they were ‘planted’ to disseminate critical comments on the revolution, the looting, Kyrgyzstan without Akayev and other issues. The nature and style of these comments suggest that they were the work of a large group of people rather than one or two activists.

FIGURE 4
Visits to Akaevu.net by Country



The bilingual design of the blog also allows some inferences to be drawn on the make-up of the audience. The total number of posts in English (52) and the total number of comments to them (27) is significantly lower than for the stories in Russian, suggesting that the blog attracted mainly a Russian-speaking audience. This assumption is also supported by the fact that the highest number of hits for a story in English is 167 compared to 483 in the Russian-language sample as well as by several irritated comments to the English posts asking why they were in English, as well as the fact that most of the comments to English posts are in Russian.

Along with the obvious measurements of visits, hits and comments as well as geographic locations of the visitors, the blog's impact can be evaluated using the following indicators:

Cross-Referencing among Blogs of a Similar Theme

Several stories from Akaevu.net were placed on other blogs relating to Central Asia, such as Registan.net and the blog by Ben Paarman, Thinking-East<www.thinking-east.net/>.

References and Stories in the Internet-Based Media

A Rambler.ru search on 29 April 2005 yielded 18 stories in which Akaevu.net was presented as a new blog, 'the trumpet of the Kyrgyz revolution', by online newspapers and news agencies in Russia and Ukraine.

Advertising and Exchange of Banners with Other Information Resources

During the process of this research, the Akaevu.net banner was spotted on 11 major Kyrgyz media and NGO sites.

Mention in Traditional Print Media

Orlova (2005) of *Moya Stolitsa-Novosti* referred to Akaevu.net in the context of Internet discussions about the Kyrgyz revolution.

Regular Contributors

Regulars included Tengis Gudava, a Georgian-American political analyst specializing in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Feedback

This came from from first-time visitors praising the site for the amount and quality of information.

'Hate Mail' and Threats to the Bloggers

One message, allegedly from 'Kyrgyzstaniens abroad supporting Akayev', was placed in the comments section for three postings. It resorted to obscene language and threats to 'get at' Ulan Melisbek, the blog creator, for 'filtering information and suppressing freedom of expression' on the site.

Conclusion

At present, it is hard to assess whether any of the 'stans' of the former Soviet Union will become a successful democracy in a foreseeable future. A more realistic question is whether new technology might bring about a *more prosperous information environment* in countries like Kyrgyzstan. In this light, we argue that Akaevu.net has demonstrated several features of illicit, informal, unofficial literature – that is, the *samizdat*, which sustained dissidence in a previous era. First, there is little original content. Most of the blog's content is generated by other sources (such as more traditional media, outside reports from NGOs and expatriates, and so on). The material is republished on the blog, making its access easier for the users who otherwise would have to visit 20–30 different sources, many physically outside the nation, to collect all the information. In addition, the content is circulated among a limited group of trusted users who understand the goal and advocacy character of the data. In turn, the content is recirculated on other sites with multiple references and hyperlinks in other sources. The content is also highly partisan: it exhibits fierce opposition to the ruling regime. And, quite in parallel to the hunting down of *samizdat* creators in the old Soviet Union, the website was constantly being hacked into, allegedly by government agents.

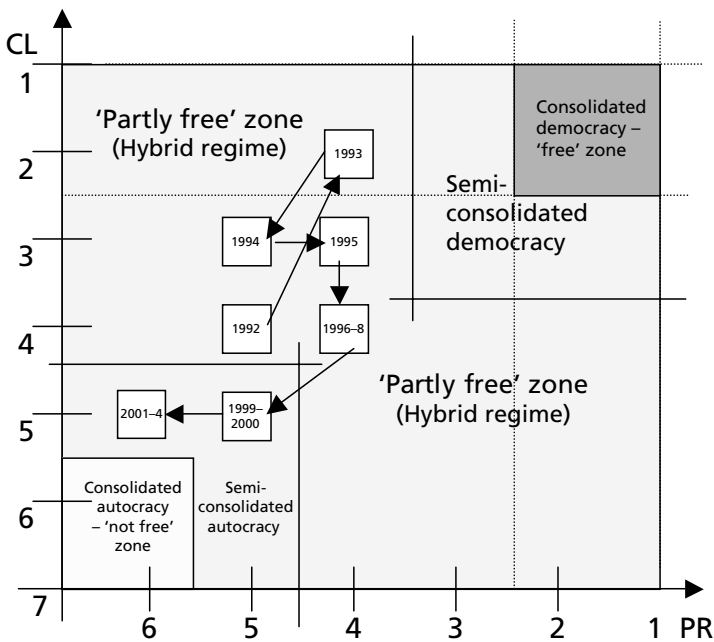
At this point, the similarity ends between past and present. In technical terms, the Internet's interactivity and pervasiveness added to a blog two additional features that were not available with printed *samizdat*: (1) the physical security of the bloggers, who cannot be reached (and are almost impossible to trace) to be arrested by the government, and (2) dialogue with the users through the comments section, which allows the bloggers to know exactly what their readers say and feel about the blog content and the situation it covers. In political terms, as one of the authors of this article can testify from personal experience with the circulation of *samizdat* in Russia of the 1980s, the KGB was much more efficient and frightening in its anti-subversion efforts than the worst of the Kyrgyz regime. Likewise, it was (and is) much easier to be an oppositional blogger in Kyrgyzstan than, say, in today's Iran or People's Republic of China.

From our analysis, then, we conclude that the blog Akaevu.net, even though it was only in existence for one month, did indeed make its contribution to coverage of the 'tulip revolution' on the Internet. It did, thus, fulfill its mission as a temporary solution to the attempt by pro-government forces to squash the flow of information from opposition sites. Such a case suggests that managed democracy may be unable to control the only truly free medium – the Internet – at least with the available means. If there exists a weakest link in undemocratic tightening of controls over the public sphere and freedom of speech, it is the Internet. And when it breaks, the information flow is impossible to stop.

Nevertheless, there are still many uncertainties about the future of democracy in Kyrgyzstan. Even though the new parliament, which became the main reason behind the revolution, was ultimately acknowledged legitimate, it stands in fierce opposition to the newly elected President Kurmanbek Bakiev. The outside observers and even the new government's prime minister, Felix Kulov, are concerned with the state's inability to fight criminal elements within both the government and the law enforcement system, as well as to bring corruption under control. Finally, President Bakiev has openly announced recently that the government has decided not to move forward with the constitutional reform to turn the republic from a presidential to a parliamentary one – the very promise that clenched his winning of the elections on 10 July 2005. The role of the blogs in these developments, depending on which course the new government will decide to take, may be that of constructive criticism facilitating the public debate or that of a lonely voice of opposition 'tucked away' on the Internet for several thousand readers. The world does not yet have an example, to paraphrase Joe Trippi's (2004) famous metaphor, of a 'revolution [that] will be blogged', but in revolutions to come, blogs will play some role, even if it is restricted to the enrichment of an information-poor environment.

Appendix

FIGURE 1A
Kyrgyzstan's Democracy Record Based on Freedom House



Note: CL = Civil liberties, PR = Political rights.

As Figure 1A shows, having gained independence Kyrgyzstan started out with the score of 5 for political rights and 4 for civil liberties in 1992. Then it shot to 4 and 2 in 1993, which was the closest to the 'free zone' the country ever progressed. Starting from 1994, the movement reversed. In the following three years, Kyrgyzstan has improved the situation for political rights but it worsened again in 1999 and 2000 owing to violations in parliamentary and presidential elections. In 2001, the country was downgraded to 6 on political rights and 5 on civil liberties and remained there until 2005.

TABLE 1A

Number of Postings and Comments by Date on Akaevu.net (23 March–4 April 2005)

	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
	March	March	March	March	March	March	March	March	March	April	April	April	April
Postings	3	41	33	34	11	28	24	13	20	7	8	11	0
Comments	17	82	32	17	20	14	36	23	40	35	18	15	0

TABLE 2A

Visits to Akaevu.net by Country (25 March 2005)

Russia	788	Ukraine	127	Canada	25	Uzbekistan	20	Italy	14
USA	777	Kazakhstan	79	Poland	22	Latvia	17	S. Korea	14
Europe	314	Turkey	43	France	21	Norway	15	Finland	13
Kyrgyzstan	239	Gt Britain	41	UAE	20	Belarus	14	Lithuania	12
Germany	133	Hungary	31	Japan	20	Georgia	14	Others	20

Notes

1. For example, the national news agency Kabar reported during the day or cited other sources that Akayev was in the country at his residence, then later allegedly went to Kazakhstan, then to Russia – but finally had to admit not knowing the president's whereabouts.
2. The blog is available but has been inactive since 25 April 2005.
3. The Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic (adopted in 1993, last amended in 2003), Art.1(1).
4. Lipman and McFaul (2001: 116) were the first to explain managed democracy Russian style for western audiences: 'Putin seeks to undermine Russia's fragile and weak democratic institutions. Putin's spin doctors call the project "managed democracy". The system they seek to create will have all the formal institutions of democracy: elections, parties, media, civil society, and so on. But the real autonomy of these institutions and, therefore, their real capacity to influence the actions of the state will be severely limited.'
5. Kyrgyzstan is also a beneficiary of the USAID-funded Internet Access and Training Program administered by IREX. At present, IATP has set up 17 public access Internet locations all over the country (only two in Bishkek) with five to 10 computers at each site, visited by up to 3000 users per month. For more information, see the IATP site <www.iatp.kg/ru/?exe=a0303>.

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