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New Media in Authoritarian Central Asia: Fuel for What?

Emerging research on the role of media in social and political unrest in North Africa and the Middle East reminds us that newer networked media tools, like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the mobile Web, are not inherently transformative. What matters is how people select and use these tools and in what cultural contexts. However, this does not mean that a search for generalizable patterns of transformation is futile. In this talk, I discuss a work-in-progress that explores how activists in the Central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan use newer networked media tactically. I begin by drawing on my past work in Kyrgyzstan and on more recent research to discuss how newer media have opened up opportunities for alternative forms of expression, participation, and learning in Kyrgyzstan. I then discuss and seek feedback on a study I am designing that investigates an information technology activist culture and its influence in Kyrgyzstan. Considerable evidence suggests that this small group may be playing a role in spreading awareness and in connecting otherwise separate domestic and international people that can lead to new ideas, new identities, and new opportunities for group actions, as well as new tensions and entrenchment. Finally, I suggest that this small group of IT activists may be filling an information and community-building void left by the increasingly irrelevant news media in Kyrgyzstan.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Hans Ibold is an assistant professor at the IU School of Journalism. His research examines media and cultural globalization and the role journalism plays when media technologies and cultures converge. He currently teaches courses in media ethics, social media and social change, and journalism and communication theory. In the industry, Hans was the technology reporter for the Los Angeles *Business Journal*, arts editor for the Idaho *Mountain Express* in Ketchum, Idaho and an online editor and features writer for Getty.edu. From 2003 to 2005, Hans served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kyrgyzstan, where he continues to travel and carry out media research. Ongoing projects investigate Twitter and social change and new media literacies. Hans earned a Ph.D. in journalism from the Missouri School of Journalism. He holds an M.S. in communication studies from Shippensburg University and a B.A. in liberal arts from The Evergreen State College. For more information, see his website at: <http://hanspeteribold.net/>