Of States and Borders on the Internet: The Role of Domain Name Extensions in Expressions of Nationalism Online in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

The space of the Internet is often described as easy to traverse with no regard for national borders. Yet few have considered what such easy border crossings on the Internet might mean to the ordinary people actually doing the traversing. Our qualitative study of regular Internet users in Kazakhstan shows that the naming of a state-controlled space on the Internet, through the use of country code top-level domain names (ccTLDs), does in fact matter to the average user. People are aware of national boundary traversals as they navigate the Internet. Respondents in our study identified their activity on the Internet as happening within or outside the space of the state to which they felt allegiance and belonging. National borders are demarcated on the Internet through naming via ccTLDs and can result in individual expressions of various types of nationalism online. We find that ccTLDs are not just symbolic markers but have real meaning and their importance increases in locations where notions of statehood are in flux.

Keywords: ethnic nationalism, civic nationalism, imagined communities, democracy, Internet use, ccTLDs

Introduction

The space of the Internet is easily traversable, and most average users are able to cross state boundaries with no more effort than a click of a mouse—at times without knowing that they are doing so (Johnson and Post 1996). Political science and policy scholars have written about this ease of state border traversals online in both concerned and exulting terms, ranging from evaluations of censorship and state control to promises of the withering of the state. Although some have seen the Internet as a perfect instantiation of globalization (Deibert 2000)—what Lessig has called "the ideal libertarian society" (2006, 2)—others have pointed out that nations and borders will remain present in legal, technological, and economic forms (Kogut 2003; Svantesson 2004). Yet few have considered what such traversals of real and imagined state boundaries on the Internet might mean to the ordinary people actually doing the traversing. In this paper we argue that contrary to expectations that they roam on the Internet free of state boundaries and limitations, many regular Internet users pay attention to the national boundaries demarcated through country code top-level domain names (ccTLDs).

Although geographical borders function as physical manifestations of state power, borders also serve as symbolic representations of statehood to citizens and non-citizens alike (Garcia 1985). Whereas most people rarely cross physical borders in their daily lives, the ease of border traversals online enables Internet users to cross digital borders without giving the process much thought. There are several ways in which online spaces such as websites or other Internet resources might signal their national affiliation. One such way is through the use of ccTLDs that are managed by an organization most often affiliated with the country in question. Such an organization is the "designated manager" of second-level domain names (DNS) with the defined ccTLD (Postel 1994; Park 2009). The presence of a ccTLD often does not mean that the server that houses the page is physically located in the territory of the country denoted by that ccTLD: a webpage or Internet resource can signal its national affiliation, regardless of its actual physical location, through the use of ccTLDs. We argue here that the majority of Internet users do not know, and likely do not care, where the resources they use online are physically located. Rather, users are more likely to interpret country-specific information embedded in the URLs, as well as in the content they consume, as symbolic markers of national spaces. In fact, prior research by Halavais (2000) using direct analysis of links between sites has demonstrated that—based exclusively on their URLs, and disregarding the actual physical locations of online resources—most sites

tend to link within a given ccTLD rather than across ccTLDs. These trends suggest that regular users and site creators tend to align themselves with a given national space rather than subscribing to a notion of a borderless online space.

The question we ask in this paper is whether the markings of state territory, that are made visible online through the use of ccTLDs and other national affiliations in URLs, might perform similar functions for expressions of statehood and nationalism as their more traditional manifestations in the physical space. The visibility of such markers may be especially relevant for Internet users who live in locations where notions of statehood, nationalism, and identity are contested, or where they are in the process of being renegotiated. We examine these issues in the context of Kazakhstan, a recently independent post-Soviet state in Central Asia, whose issues of statehood, nationalism, and identity are perhaps some of the most complex of the region, while the rate of Internet adoption is increasingly rapid (Deibert 2010; Dave 2007).

The focus on nationalism may seem reductive, in view of research focusing on the democratizing potential of the Internet, especially in non-Western countries. The very ease of border crossings could, and in many cases does, encourage the free flows of information that are instrumental in democratic processes, through subverting some hierarchies and improving access (Caldas et al. 2008). These processes are likely to be particularly important in places where democracy is nascent, with researchers often focusing on both the potential for democratization and the less drastic, but often more profound, structural changes that are fostered by the availability of alternative information and communication methods (MacKinnon 2008). We do not deny that it is important to consider the democratizing potential of the Internet in Kazakhstan. However, our findings suggest that how these processes function may be better understood if we consider the importance of the markers that for many users delineate the Internet's locations and borders.

Background

The Internet has long been associated with notions of advancing democracy, freedom, and possibilities; often attributed to lower levels of legal regulation and the difficulties of state control of information flows within states and across geographical borders (Castells 2000; Lessig 2006). Despite this positive rhetoric, many scholars have pointed out repeatedly that the development and the resulting architecture of the Internet was—and still is—

heavily influenced by the Western world in general, and the United States in particular (Wei and Kolko 2005). Moreover, as different countries add the Internet to their list of capabilities, they bring with them their own ideas, ideologies, and methods of control regarding how their own citizens should navigate the Internet (Kogut 2003). They also bring with them their own ideas of how to manifest their borders on the Internet (Yang 2006; MacKinnon 2008).

Although ccTLDs are the most common marker of national affiliation, they are rarely used in the United States, suggesting a largely U.S.-centric structure of generic TLD use such as .com, .net, or .org (Leiner et al. 2002). The lack of use of the country-level identification .us for businesses and personal sites may have been one of the drivers of the idea that the Internet can be a borderless space. The use of ccTLDs is far more common in countries other than the United States. We suggest that one of the reasons for this could be an attempt to carve out a national space on the Internet where borders are delineated—to clearly mark non-U.S. territories and to provide symbolic markers for Internet users.

On Nationalism

Benedict Anderson significantly advanced the study of nationalism with his evocative conceptualization of the nation as an "imagined political community" that is "both inherently limited and sovereign" (1991, 6). Anderson used the rather malleable notion of imagination to describe how people who have not and will never meet come to think of themselves as part of the same political unit. This new form of consciousness—nationalism—had two primary drivers. In the nineteenth century, the rise of a capitalist print media pushed toward standardizing communication, and the consolidating state provided the administrative framework to support these new conceptualizations of one's place in a larger community. Nationalism as a particularly media-supported process carries much conceptual weight for studying expressions of nationalism online, but nationalism is also connected to the state and nation.

In Max Weber's well-travelled definition, the state is "the human community that, within a defined territory—and the key word here is 'territory'—(successfully) claims the *monopoly of legitimate force* for itself" (2008, 156). First formulated in 1919, it seems to have become more accurate over the twentieth and twenty-first century. Defining territory necessarily means establishing borders through political and military means. As borders demarcate the spatial limits of a state, political communities must also have those on the outside to draw distinctions from those included. Over

the last century, two dominant forms of nationalism have often operated in tension: ethnic/racial nationalisms (often connected to language use) that aimed to define the political body in terms of perceived inherited traits; and civic nationalisms that aimed to bridge these potential divisions with a larger state-centered vision of community. Both forms of nationalism share the goal of aligning the constituent group and the state. The resulting product is a nation (Gellner 2006).

Kazakhstan as a Post-Soviet State

Just two decades ago, the people living in Kazakhstan largely shared a civic understanding of "nation" with the people living in other parts of the Soviet Union. With the Soviet Union's fall, however, this conceptualization changed precipitously from a multi-ethnic notion of Soviet personhood to ethnic considerations of belonging (Kharkhordin 2005). "'The world's first state of workers and peasants' was the world's first state to institutionalize ethnoterritorial federalism, classify all citizens according to their biological nationalities and formally prescribe preferential treatment of certain ethnically defined populations" (Slezkine 1994, 415). State recognition of nationalities rested largely on ethnic and linguistic lines, with each group entitled to their own territory within the Soviet Union (Slezkine 1994). These ranged from autonomous regions within larger states to the various Soviet republics. Once assigned demarcated borders, the Soviet state encouraged each to develop their own national culture that largely rested on language; language becoming the clearest identifier of these units[1] (Schlyter 2003; Hirsch 2000). The Soviet Union supported and codified this ethnic nationalism through policies that rested on these conceptualizations of difference, but which were united by the broader idea of Soviet personhood. After the fall of Soviet communism, the ethnic–linguistic identities institutionalized by the state flourished, subsuming the Soviet civic ideal in the space left by its collapse (Slezkine 1994; Hirsch 2000; Brubaker 1996). In multi-ethnic Kazakhstan, political change has occurred in the context of a continuity of a strongly ethnically Kazakh national leadership (Dave 2007).

The global context for these political changes was the liberalization of markets and increased financial flows around the world, over roughly the last four decades. Economic globalization led to many social and political

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[1] There is some disagreement in the Soviet studies literature over the character of Soviet colonialism and its similarities to western forms. In this paper we take a position based on the work of F. Hirsch and others on the prevalence of the state-led push toward alignment along ethnic lines in the course of Soviet nationalities policy.

changes, which in turn led to speculation that states were losing power to multinational corporations and supranational institutions. It is tempting to view the Internet as a paradigmatic example of a new globalized environment, but the state and nationalism, rather than withering, constantly enter into individual decision making when people use the Internet (Drezner 2004).

Territorial borders are one of the most readily visible manifestations of the state, marked as they often are by fences, guards, and no-man's lands. They also have much symbolic importance: border crossings are strong reminders and reinforcements of group membership. Territorial markers of the nation exist on the Internet in the form of ccTLDs, and expressions of nationalism can often take the form of language use or regionally relevant content. For example, Wei and Kolko (2005) illustrate how Uzbek users employ different languages, and pay attention to how they locate themselves on the Internet, as they balance the shifting political climate and available online resources in the process of appropriating and integrating the Internet into their cultural discourse. In more recent work from the region, Johnson and colleagues also point out the importance of language and regional content for Central Asian Internet users, but argue that ccTLDs do not matter as such, providing examples of sites that ostensibly signal a range of affiliations from generic TLDs to the .ru ccTLD (Johnson et al. 2009). However, in every example presented by the authors, there is national affiliation information at least somewhere in the URL—even if it is not present in the ccTLD—which suggests other considerations at work. Beyond the employment of nationalist rhetoric, symbolic territory is forged through content, where the form of the URL and the ccTLD can serve as identifiers. We now explore how regular Internet users navigate sites and interpret URL information, and whether such information is important for locating national affiliations online.

Language in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is a sparsely populated and landlocked country, where ethnic Kazakhs make up just over 60 percent of the population of roughly 16 million. Use of the Kazakh language is a particularly sensitive issue in Kazakhstan, and is closely tied to political will and expressions of ethnic identity by ethnic Kazakhs. Language is also an important aspect of the nationalist policies of Kazakhstan (Dave 2007). Kazakh is the national language, and the government has implemented a set of requirements for language knowledge and language proficiency for all government documents and all government employees (Nysanbaeva 2003). Beginning in the early

1920s, at the time of formation of the Soviet Union, the Russian language was used as a symbol of Soviet unity. For the next 70 years, the Russian language functioned as a unifying factor and a symbol of both Soviet culture and the Soviet people, motivating its elevation in importance in Kazakhstan and the other republics, despite its lack of status as the national language (Hirsch 2000). Russian soon became the favored "career language" for the education of most youth during the Soviet times (Schlyter 2003). The varieties of ethnic identities that consolidated in the Soviet Union, and most strongly in the Soviet republics, remained in a subordinate position both in terms of the language and the practice of internationalism within the union. The "Great Russians" remained normative in the language of Soviet internationalism, opening themselves to solidarity with others through communist internationalism (Slezkine 1994).

Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Kazakhstan gaining its independence, the Russian language has continued to dominate in Kazakhstan. This is due to several reasons. Ethnic Kazakhs constitute just over 60 percent of the population, and the non-Kazakh population had little reasons to learn Kazakh during Soviet times. Due to the elevated status of Russian as a career-language for so many years, more than a third of ethnic Kazakhs are believed to have a higher proficiency in Russian than in Kazakh (Nysanbaeva 2003; Dave 2007). Exact statistics for the number of Russians and ethnic Kazakhs who are proficient in the Kazakh language are difficult to obtain. The question of language thus remains a highly politicized and sensitive issue in Kazakhstan, especially in relation to discussions of ethnic and civic ideas of the nation. However, government policies have been successful in limiting the potential of unrest and violence due to issues of ethnic nationalism (Smagulova 2008).

Internet Use in Kazakhstan

Similar to other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan can be construed as a digitally nascent society (Wei and Kolko 2005), where Internet adoption and proficiency are comparatively low. The Kazakh government has invested heavily in modernizing the aging telecom infrastructure and improving both mobile and Internet provision across the country, both inside and outside of urban population centers. However, the government also engages in repressive censorship and control of journalistic content and Internet usage.[2] Despite this censorship, Kazakhstan has experienced a rapid increase in

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[2] Reporters without borders. *Press Freedom Index 2010* http://en.rsf.org (we thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this citation).

Internet audience, with penetration nearly doubling between 2008 and 2010, resulting in approximately 25 percent of the population using the Internet as of June 2010 (Deibert 2010; MIGNews 2010). As the majority of Kazakhstan's population shares a high level of competency in Russian, they are able to take advantage of Internet resources from Russia. However, Kazakhstan is quickly developing its own Internet infrastructure and resources in both the Kazakh and Russian languages.

Given the rapid growth of available local information, communication, and entertainment resources, we expected to see language-based enclaves develop within the Kazakh Internet space, as an outgrowth of the ethnic and linguistic nationalism that flourished and shaped the trajectories of the new countries created after the fall of the Soviet Union. The fact that the Russian-language Internet is older and more established has limited this effect. Russia has been ahead of the other Former Soviet Union (FSU) countries in the resources that it has committed to promote Internet development, resulting in a large number of successful Russian-language Internet sites being available before most other FSU countries had even named a portion of the Internet as their own. The populations of many FSU countries (including Kazakhstan), because they have few language boundaries with Russia, have therefore gravitated toward Russian sites. Russia's better developed sites—and vastly larger human and economic resources, compared with Kazakhstan—have furthered this long-standing relationship. The cultural, social, and economic power of Russia continues to overshadow its neighbors, even as they increase their Internet use.

A Technical Note on ccTLDs

Before we move on to discuss our study and findings, it is important to note some practical information on the use of the .kz ccTLD in Kazakhstan. According to the internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA), the request for the .kz ccTLD was initially approved in 1994 (IANA 2005). Each country designs its own policies under which it administers ccTLDs. According to the current Kazakhstan registration rules, a site that has a second level domain within the .kz address space does not have to be hosted in the physical territory of Kazakhstan, although the Kazakh government retains the right to revoke the use of any .kz domain if it does not comply with other requirements (AiC KZ 2010). This is a recent change and the Kazakh government previously required that servers that serve the .kz

domain be housed on the territory of Kazakhstan[3]. They have used this rule in the past to de-register the domains of sites with politically oppositional content, or sites deemed inappropriate (Deibert and Rohozinski 2010).

Methodology

The research presented here is part of a larger ongoing research project investigating how people in Kazakhstan use the Internet and other technologies for communication and information seeking purposes and how these technologies are being integrated into everyday practices. The first author conducted semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and many hours of informal conversations and observations in the course of visiting and participating in IT-related and educational events such as BarCamp 2010[4] in Almaty, and several college debate club meetings at Kazakh State University, where social media use and potential were discussed. These observations were conducted in order to get a sense of the kinds of discussions around IT-related issues that were relevant in Kazakhstan. Observations were also conducted during informal daily interactions while visiting Kazakhstan for extended periods of time. We conducted fieldwork in three different cities in Kazakhstan in the spring of 2009, and again in the spring of 2010, spending approximately 45 days in the country in total. The interview and focus group participants were recruited using snowball sampling, seeded through personal contacts or initial encounters in Internet cafés and public spaces. All fieldwork was conducted with the goal of understanding the role of communication technologies—such as cell phones and the Internet—in daily life, and identifying potential trajectories of their further development and use. Conversations centered on mediated forms of communication and information seeking practices, as well as online contributions in the form of blogging or posts on discussion forums. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Russian by the first author and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each, usually in a location of the interviewee's choosing.

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[3] The Kazakh government is in the process of changing this law once again to require that .kz domain servers be housed on the territory of Kazakhstan. It is not clear when this law will go into effect - http://profit.kz/news/006189/.
[4] BarCamp is an international network of user-generated conferences (or unconferences). They are open, participatory workshop-events, whose content is provided by participants. For the Kazakhstan BarCamp, see http://www.barcampkz.net/.

Participants

Along with observations and informal conversations, our sample also included 38 individual semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with 11 participants in total. The interviews were evenly divided, with half the interviewees being directly engaged in IT-related activities or policy debates, and half having no relationship to IT development or policy discussions. The sample consisted of seven local Internet resource developers, five IT professionals, one forum moderator, five bloggers, and one high-level Internet policy advisor, blogger, and activist. The rest of the interviews, and both focus groups, were conducted with people of varying socioeconomic status and backgrounds, and focused on patterns of everyday technology use. None of these respondents were actively involved in the IT industry. The sample included 25 men and 24 women, aged 18–62 years (average 35 years). All but two were native to Kazakhstan. The two Russians who had relocated to Kazakhstan did so prior to the dissolution of Soviet Union. Of the interviewees, all were fluent in Russian, 38 percent were fluent in Kazakh, and 40 percent spoke at least some English. Six of the interviewees spoke both Kazakh and English. In terms of language proficiency, our sample had fewer Kazakh speakers than is currently reported across the population (Smagulova 2008). This was likely due to the fact that the study was conducted in urban population centers, where fewer people tend to be proficient in the state language.

Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Following the methods of qualitative data analysis suggested by Emerson et al. (1995), we developed a coding scheme based on open coding of transcripts and field notes. Our initial purpose was to investigate the uses of information and communication technologies for maintaining personal and community connections, for information seeking practices, and for participation in online communities. We combined the open codes into themes, distinguished by technology-use orientation (personal, interpersonal, community oriented), type of use (communication, information seeking, content contribution), and by level of use-competency (focused limited use, broad levels of use). Relevant references from each transcript were combined and summarized to form a coherent narrative for each theme. These summaries then allowed us to look at the bigger picture. Evidence of an acute awareness of whether people were visiting sites within or outside the Kazakh national Internet space was prominent in the data. Respondents

who contributed content online also tended to delineate whether their contributions were within or outside the Kazakh national Internet space, although this differed by the language they used for their contributions and online participation. All representative quotes presented here were translated by the first author who is a native Russian speaker, with the respondent's residence at the time of the interview indicated.

Findings

The Many Internets

Although much popular rhetoric in Western countries continues to speak of an Internet that spans the world, the experience of talking about the Internet in Kazakhstan begins to question this notion of a globally undifferentiated online space. Consider the following exchange in the course of an informal conversation with a college student in Almaty, subsequently noted by the first author in her field notes:

> Student: "Well Nur.kz I think is based on similar portals they have in by-net and I guess they are really popular there."
> Author: "What is 'by-net'?"
> Student: "Oh, well that's where the Belorussians are, you know, like Belorussian internet"

There are two specific points that are worth noting in this exchange. First note the use of "they have," which clearly denotes a separate space and a notion of ownership of that space by someone other than the respondent. The second point is that *by-net* is where one might find Belorussians; presumably because that is where one would expect them to be. In Kazakhstan, the term *kaz-net* was used equally often by various media outlets, government announcements, and the majority of the people we spoke with to denote the Internet that encompasses all things related to, and originating from, Kazakhstan. Respondents talked of distinctly named Internet spaces delineated by national affiliation. For example, being neighbors, both individuals as well as mass media outlets often mentioned *uz-net* when referring to the Uzbek Internet space. People in Kazakhstan also routinely accessed *ru-net*—the older and more developed Russian Internet space—that offered a plethora of resources from search engines to social network sites for Russian-speaking audiences from the FSU. Thus *ru-net* in

some ways mirrored the continuing dominance of the Russian language and Russian culture in FSU countries online.

KazNet is Empty

In the winter of 2009 the recently defunct agency of information and communication of the republic of Kazakhstan (AIC RK) released an official report that made recommendations to develop resources in Kazakh Internet, recognizing the importance of local content, improvements in telecommunication infrastructure, and reduction of the digital divide through education and promotion (Nysanbaeva 2003). A large proportion of government support went toward two specific projects—implementation of e-government services, and promotion and development of resources and content in *kaz-net* by Internet-based businesses.[5] In the spring of 2010, the agency of information and communication was disbanded in favor of moving management of Internet-related issues to the Ministry of Communication and Information. This allowed the Kazakh government to take an even more active role in the promotion and control of Internet-related issues. The minister of communication and information conducted several formal meetings with the leading Internet businesses in Kazakhstan, and participated in a series of open forums discussing the issues faced by the development of local content in Kazakh Internet space.

These actions were not simply government involvement, but a response to something that the majority of the people we spoke to in the course of this study pointed out time and again. As one Kazakh language educator confidently told the first author: "Kazakh internet is really mostly empty" (AK, Almaty). Along with many others, a systems administrator for a local travel agency described his perception of the local space as follows: "Well you just sit and Google things because in kaz-net you just torrent, there isn't much there except for this one forum everyone uses" (ZN, Almaty). Although there are efforts to produce both platforms and content online, as one entrepreneur suggested: "Kaz-net is developing, but we are young …" (SI, Aktau), the prevailing feeling was that too few resources and little interesting content is available. As one prominent local blogger, whose contributions were available both on local Kazakh sites as well as in spaces explicitly blocked in Kazakhstan explained: "The information space of Kazakhstan is impoverished, simply impoverished. It is objectively like that" (AKAN, Almaty).

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[5] From author's field notes.

This expressed need for *kaz-net* to be somehow less empty, to be full of competitive resources and unique, interesting content, seemed to have come from a need to feel some form of national pride—a need to feel that the country's achievements were being demonstrated online to the world in general, and at times to Russia specifically. The statements that described *kaz-net* as empty were often made as expressions of frustration with the current state of things by local residents, who were as likely to be IT professionals as not. We interpreted these expressions as examples of a kind of civic nationalism where, despite the fact that Russian resources were available, our respondents often sought local resources or openly expressed disappointment about the absence thereof.

Us versus Them—the Use of Pronouns "We" and "Ours"

Both the government rhetoric of development and the regular users' perceptions of the Internet space were striking, precisely because they unquestionably delineated the national Kazakh Internet space from other resources; which were just as easily available, but whose origins were not in Kazakhstan. In the course of each interview, respondents often used pronouns such as "we," "us," and "ours" to indicate that particular Internet resources had originated from within Kazakhstan. For example, a prominent blogger when asked the question "what are some of the sites that you make sure to visit often?" responded as follows: "Well I don't read too many of **our own** bloggers, but **our** oppositional news-rags are worth checking out online" (MS, Almaty).

In both formal interviews and informal conversations, our participants often used this construction to denote placement and national ownership of certain sites or resources. For example one local Almaty musician explained: "Well in ru-net **they have** habrahabr and it's a lot smarter, but even there the arguments devolve sometimes. **We don't have** anything like this **here** yet" (SB, Almaty). When describing which sites they used for communicating with friends, a focus group of younger Internet-savvy women explained their use of Russian-based social network sites as follows: "Well Russians, **they** over there have much better resources and so all of us use those…" and "Well **we** don't have anything like odnoklassniki.ru, but everyone's on there, but it's Russian" (FG1, Aktau).

In nearly every interview, respondents indicated they were aware that Russian-language Internet resources originating in Russia tended to dominate the Internet landscape in Kazakhstan. They certainly used social network sites such as odnoklassniki.ru and vkontakte.ru, free email systems such as mail.ru and search engines such as yandex.ru, but at the same time

demonstrated hyper-awareness that these sites were of Russian origin. As one university student explained: "Well so mail.ru is a Russian site, yeah, but um… **we** don't have a good one **in kaz-net** so like yeah, have to go out to the Russian one" (OC, Almaty).

In the course of data analysis, it became clear that the rhetorical device "we" was used consistently not to identify specific ties or specific groups of people known to the respondent, but in order to denote imagined others that engendered the respondents' notion of Kazakhstan. The respondent's notion of their national community focused on people, belonging, and ethnicity, rather than on state institutions and politics.

Language and Expressions of Ethnicity

When speaking of available Internet resources and the persistent dominance of sites originating from Russia, many ethnic Kazakh respondents brought up issues of the Kazakh language on the Internet. After all, Internet use is clearly dependent on language proficiency, where a variety of resources become available to those users who know more than one language. In Kazakhstan, people commented on the importance of both Russian and English simply for navigating online. For many young Kazakh-speaking respondents, however, use of Kazakh was an important marker of national space and a performance of ethnic nationalism online.

Young ethnic Kazakh activists translated interfaces of existing Western resources such as Facebook and Wordpress into Kazakh by contacting the companies and offering translation services, often for free. The major impetus of this work was to create an available space for young Kazakh Internet users where they could interact and create content in Kazakh. Translation efforts declined recently as local Kazakh resources such as video hosting services (kiwi.kz) and blog platforms (yvision.kz—initially offered exclusively in Russian but quickly translated into Kazakh by the same activists) appeared, supporting the Kazakh alphabet, and providing Kazakh language interfaces. The choice of Western rather than Russian resources for translation stemmed from a perception that Russian resources were largely expected to translate much of their functionality into Kazakh themselves, as a demonstration of their commitment to the market in Kazakhstan. Ensuring the visibility of Kazakhstan and the Kazakh language was an important mission for many ethnic Kazakhs: "It is important to encourage content in Kazakh on the Internet because **we** want to ensure **we** are visible" (AK, Almaty).

In the course of observations, the first author participated in several meetings of a student debate club at the Kazakh National University. One

afternoon, a local media activist gave a short presentation on the opportunities provided by new media. The students present were visibly agitated and excited, asking questions and debating the finer points of what it meant to produce digital content on the Internet in Kazakh. Their major conclusion was that the Internet offered an opportunity for expressions of ethnic identity through collaborative production of Kazakh-language content, something they felt they could not do through more traditional outlets. The presenter later explained to the authors in an interview: "Russians dominate kaz-net right now, but Kazakh speakers have an advantage because we have access to all of kaz-net being bilingual and Russian-speakers don't see Kazakh language content" (AY, Almaty).

Many Kazakh bloggers noted the differences between the content of Kazakh and Russian blogs, and the perceived danger of an ethnic language-split in *kaz-net* where Russian speakers could not be aware of the vibrant Kazakh-language *kaz-net*, while Kazakh speakers had no problem traversing these language boundaries. Kazakh bloggers kept their blogs on Wordpress or other free blog platforms, arguing that it was important to enable expression in the language and it mattered less where these expressions were located—on a wordpress platform or on a site with an explicitly .kz ccTLD. Kazakh bloggers often commented that Kazakh-language blogging was more concerned with the inherent problems in the country related to issues of economy and politics as well as concerns of language and culture; the latter two being unusual topics for Russian-speaking discussions. A prominent activist and Kazakh blogger explained the difference: "The Russian-speakers, what can they write about? They can write about creativity or design. A Kazakh-speaking blogger in the majority of cases writes about the difficulties of Kazakhstan and expresses real concern and emotion for the country, it's deeper" (KM, Almaty).

From observations and interviews, we note that it was ethnic Kazakh activitsts who often held ethnic nationalist motivations. In a multi-ethnic society such as Kazakhstan, citizens of other ethnicities were less likely to advance ethnic ideas of community belonging. At the same time, use of Kazakh online did not necessarily exclude non-Kazakh ethnicities, nor did it automatically include all ethnic Kazakhs. Language proficiency is commonly related to ethnic origin but not always (Smagulova 2008). Moreover, ethnic Kazakh respondents who knew the language, but who were not involved in activism and blogging rarely paid attention to such discussions. Non-Kazakh speakers tended to overlook Kazakh-language content production on the Internet, generally dismissing discussions about language and culture as "girls writing about poetry." This suggested a particular kind of tension evident in Kazakhstan, where expressions of ethnic

nationalism from young Kazakh-speaking activists were carefully ignored in the larger context of civically nationalist discussions.

Yet civic nationalism was expressed in concerns over where Kazakh-language discussions might be placed. During a Central Asia Bar Camp meeting, one of the most prominent Kazakh bloggers made a short presentation on the number of bloggers producing content in Kazakh. The final slide of the presentation was a relatively long list of blogs. Someone in the audience commented that it was a shame so few of the blogs were "in *kaz-net*," meaning the URLs lacked the .kz extension. This generated a prolonged discussion on what it meant to be seen as a legitimate part of *kaz-net*, and why having a .kz URL extension was an important consideration.

In the example above, the audience members clearly disagreed whether content produced in Kazakh was sufficient, or whether the .kz extension was necessary in order to mark the bloggers as legitimately part of *kaz-net*. The prevailing feeling was confusion over why people writing on local issues of culture, language, and education had to be discussing these ideas somehow outside of the space locally defined by the ccTLD .kz. Despite some agreement that it was imperative to support the Kazakh language online, by carefully nurturing nascent blogging and content production attempts, for many participants it was nevertheless seen as important to do so within the .kz domain. Ethnic nationalism aside, considerations of civic nationalism for the advancement and growth of local content were connected with explicit placement online.

ccTLDs as Statements of Affinity, Belonging, and Opposition

In the course of many interviews, participants brought up the domain extensions of various sites they discussed as a way to help explain their interpretations of what these sites were about, where they were from, and what might be legitimately expected from these online spaces. For example, one homemaker, who enjoyed participating in various charity activities in Almaty, explained her interpretation of a Russian gift-exchange site as follows: "Well they took the .org extension right away, you know, because they are doing this themselves and trying to be international, not just Russian" (LA, Almaty).

The .org extension is seen in this case as a marker of internationalism that is not ethnically or nationally affiliated with a particular place, despite the fact that everything on the site was presented and conducted in Russian. Another popular generic TLD was .info, often seen as a marker of something generically informative or informational, somehow unaffiliated with any particular national, ethnic or cultural space. Business

owners treated both generic and country TLDs somewhat differently: while some owned both a generic .com and a mirror on a .kz (explaining that .com added legitimacy in the eyes of the non-Kazakh visitors, but a .kz extension was important to maintain continuity and presence in *kaz-net*), others spoke of having a .kz extension as a matter of pride. As an online business owner in Almaty explained, expressing both pride and affiliation at once: "No, we are *kaz-net* of course, it's a .kz URL and we are the most successful internet business here right now" (DCT, Almaty).

Yet probably the most evocative discussions of online location came from bloggers and journalists who participated in oppositional discussion and news sites, or who produced political commentary. While quite a few of the bloggers had personal blogs on LiveJournal, seen in Kazakhstan as a Russian-language space of the intellectual elite, many others also maintained sites on Kazakh blog platforms, or contributed articles to group discussion sites.[6] LiveJournal and many other Western blog platforms are blocked in Kazakhstan, and are accessible only through a variety of proxy servers. Several oppositional news sites and discussion spaces are also blocked and some have been forced to move to a non-.kz URL in order to remain accessible: "Geo.kz moved to Tuvalu, Geokz.tv now. They were constantly getting DOS'ed and their commentaries page was always getting blocked so they moved out" (MS, Almaty).

In an environment where the government has the right to grant or de-register a ccTLD, acquiring a .kz URL can be problematic for sites that explicitly position themselves in political opposition to the approved mass media content produced in Kazakhstan. These sites commonly opt for generic TLDs such as .net or, more often, .info. Yet, the majority of these sites deliberately retained "kz" somewhere in their URL as a way to continue signaling national affiliation, despite hosting their sites on servers in Russia, Latvia, or even the United States, and using generic TLDs. Selecting where to host a site and which generic TLD to use in these cases was nevertheless a complex process. One blogger and active contributor to several oppositional discussion and news sites explained how Internet-enabled democratic possibilities of free discussion were still informed by national boundary considerations: "So you can't have .kz because they will just pull it or just never approve it, you don't want to do .ru obviously and .com is the most expensive but it's also commercial and American so .info is good. Because we are really providing information that's important to people here, or at

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[6] In the course of field work, many conversations with political bloggers and activitists were informal. At times, formal interviews were also not recorded at the request of the participants.

least should be important, you know… raising public consciousness" (DN, Almaty).

Taken together, these findings suggest that people in Kazakhstan were acutely aware of national boundary traversals as they navigated the Internet. These traversals were made obvious through particular infrastructural issues, where internal domains are much faster and more reliably accessible than external domains. However, decisions of domain selection for the storage of personal mail and files, or selection of a particular social network site, evidenced an awareness of national boundaries and nationalism. For example, the process of selecting where to house a news source that could be construed as oppositional in Kazakhstan—and therefore swiftly blocked by the Kazakh authorities and accessible only through proxies—was complicated by considerations of the importance of association with a neutral (.info) rather than a Western (.com) domain name extension. On the other hand, when a site was registered with a generic TLD .org, it was perceived as more "international," even though the content on the site was in Russian. Such a complex reasoning belied the power of the Internet to facilitate border crossings, attempts at democratization, and free expression. It also illustrated the particular meanings of internationalism, nationalism, and belonging that places on the Internet could acquire, simply by association with a particular domain extension or URL format. The physical location of the servers where these sites were actually hosted mattered very little, and never figured in the discussions.

Discussion and Conclusions

Nationalisms and states are necessarily defined by their respective limitations and borders. These limitations and borders can have physical manifestations, but this paper emphasizes the tangible manifestations of national markers online. National borders and nationalism informs people's use of the Internet and how they perceive and interpret their own use. It also informs government action, and how users form allegiances to particular spaces or sites on the Internet. The attribution of affiliation and membership to particular sites has nothing to do with the reality of that site's physical location, or the technological feasibility thereof: it derives from both the symbolism of the naming and adherence of the content. In Kazakhstan, this process has involved contested notions of ethnic and civic nationalism. This is not so much the "resistance to Globalization" that Wei and Kolko (2005) talk about, but a particular historically and socially situated process which is occurring in a recently independent multi-ethnic country with a need to

delineate space that they can claim as "theirs" on the Internet, in order to confirm the continuity of their identities.

Resources from Russia (which clearly dominate any Russian-speaking Internet space) were seen by Kazakh users as the most convenient to use, but also at the same time as a kind of competition. Given Kazakhstan's extended and complex relationship with Russia, a collective opposition to Russian domination has served to evoke nationalism in users' decisions online. This is especially true of young ethnic Kazakhs seeking ways to make stronger expressions of their ethnic identity, and to further a language that is clearly at a disadvantage in an Internet space that is dominated by Russian. This may account for the privileging by young ethnic Kazakhs of Western resources, especially those that offer ways of easily adding functionality in a new language, like Wordpress and Facebook. It is important to note, however, that regardless of whether Internet users from Kazakhstan were ethnically Kazakh, the majority of our respondents held strong ideas about borders on the Internet—they just didn't entirely agree on who gets defined as part of the *kaz-net* space, and what language *kaz-net* should be in. Our respondents identified with their country and often felt like underdogs from a little-known geographical place with few resources that is just coming online. This may account for the acutely visible expressions of affinities and national pride in these conversations. Here we see a tension between the ethnic nationalism of some Kazakhs and civic nationalism in this multi-ethnic society.

Users in Kazakhstan viewed *kaz-net* as a manifestation of the nation to which they felt they belonged and in which they were invested. Despite the diverging interests of the users—from dissident bloggers to businesses—nationalism, their sense of belonging to a nation struggling to define itself, and anti-colonial sentiment toward Russia, resulted in some similar ways in which these users talked about *kaz-net*, and similar ways in which they perceived the national borders on the Internet. The state played a vital role in enforcing limits, in blocking sites, and in its attempts at particular forms of control. Regardless of these state-level efforts, however, the imagined community of people who felt they belonged to Kazakhstan harbored a desire to feel ownership of some pieces of the Internet. The domain extension .kz, two letters that provided a spatial marking on the Internet, has functioned as a focal point for the creation of the imagined community of the nation in the digital world. In the end, ccTLDs are not just symbolic markers but have real meaning—and their importance increases in locations where notions of nationalism and statehood are in flux.

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