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SOCIAL NETWORK SITE USERS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN KYRGYZSTAN

Abstract:

There are a few key studies around the social impact of information technologies and Internet access within Central Asia.

Kyrgyzstan, with a high level of political participation and an avant-garde position regarding internet access in Central Asia, broadband and social media penetration in the population, is a critical case for studying social media in relation to political participation.

New media combined with a high level of internet freedom in Kyrgyzstan is a powerful tool that has the possibility to channel citizen opinion, offer an alternative to traditional print, TV and radio outlets, and craft new methods by which the citizen or collective interacts with the political and social environment (Robbins, 2012).

According to some authors, the Tulip Revolution in 2005 in Kyrgyzstan was the first revolution amongst post-Soviet nations where the Internet was considered a factor in disseminating information and mobilization political protest. Still in its infancy, the Internet in Kyrgyzstan played its first role – albeit a highly weak one – in supporting anti-government protests which overthrew President Akayev and his government during the “Tulip Revolution” in 2005.

In 2010, five years after new media saw its first use as a political tool in the “Tulip Revolution”, the significance of new media was revealed once more when Kyrgyzstan was mired in political conflict between the months of March and June. In March various online communities began reporting on allegations of widespread corruption in then President Bakiyev’s government. In spite of its further attempts to stifle political and social unrest by censoring traditional Kyrgyz media and blocking access to certain Russian TV stations, Bakiyev’s regime was unable to stop the elusive flow of information running through new media outlets. On April 7 an estimated 10,000 protesters gathered around Bishkek and successfully stormed the White House, forcing President Bakiyev to flee the country.

This study analyzes the practices and attitudes of social media users and whether using social network sites alone drives previously inactive respondents to political participation. Three types of users – members of political parties, members of interest organizations, and non-members – are interviewed in focus groups about their attitudes to political content in the social network site Facebook.

Keywords:

Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, political participation, new media, interaction, social media, Tulip Revolution.