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The Internet and Kazakh Culture: Challenges and Prospects

This paper considers potential negative implications of Kazakhstan's pursuit of extensive Internet access. Specifically, we critically evaluate the following two concerns about the widespread availability of the Internet: a) that it will result in an erosion of traditional Kazakh culture and b) that an increase in time spent on-line will tend to produce individual isolation and thereby an increase in the incidence of cases of depression. With respect to the first concern, we make a prima facie case that several specific features of Kazakh culture make it particularly well-suited to absorb extensive access to the Internet without a resulting distortion or erosion of traditional Kazakh culture. With respect to the second concern, we note that the potential threat to psychological health posed by easy access to the Internet is significant and ought to be taken seriously, but we conclude that this threat is counterbalanced by other respects in which heightened access to the Internet can enhance mental health.

Key words: intellectual capital, Internet, Islam, Kazakh culture, mental health

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Интернет және қазақ мәдениеті: мәселелері мен келешегі

Мақалада Қазақстан халқының интернетке кең көлемде қол жеткізуінің негативті жақтары қарастырылған. Жекелеп айтқанда, біріншіден, бұл әрекет қазақ мәдениетінің бет әлпетінің өзгеруіне әкеледі делінсе, екіншіден, интернет желісінде ұзақ уақыт өткізу адамдардың шеттеліп, депрессивті жағдайларға әкеліп соқтырады деген ой ұсынылған.

Түйін сөздер: интернет, ислам, қазақ мәдениеті.

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Интернет и казахская культура: проблемы и перспективы

В статье рассматриваются возможные негативные последствия обширного доступа в Интернет Казахстанского населения. В частности, критически оценены следующие две проблемы по широкому доступу в Интернет: а) что это приведет к размыванию традиционной казахской культуры и б) что увеличение времени, проведенного на сайте, как правило, приводит к индивидуальной изоляции и, тем самым, повлияет на рост депрессивных случаев.

Ключевые слова: интеллектуальный капитал, интернет, ислам, казахская культура, психическое здоровье.

Introduction

The Republic of Kazakhstan saw a dramatic upsurge in Internet Access in the first decade of the Twenty First Century as it moved from 1.01% of Internet Users in 2001 to 50.6% in 2011 [8]. While the apparent advantages of this rapid development for the cultivation of both

intellectual capital and commerce are significant and widely remarked upon, it is important to temper this enthusiasm by considering whether there are significant disadvantages associated with this development where such disadvantages may outweigh the potential benefits to education and commerce of such heightened ICT (Information and Communications Technology) penetration. In this

essay, we consider two potential negative outcomes that such an increase in ICT penetration might hold for the Republic of Kazakhstan. First, we consider the threat that Kazakh culture may be eroded or even overwhelmed through a «virtual colonization» by the foreign cultures that dominate the structure and content of the Web. Second, we consider the fact that widespread availability of the Internet allows individuals to spend a significant amount of time on-line and that this may be a source of individual isolation and thereby increase the incidence of depression among the citizens of Kazakhstan. With respect to the former concern, we make a prima facie case that several specific features of Kazakh culture make it particularly well-suited to absorb extensive access to the Web without a resulting distortion or erosion of its distinctive culture. With respect to the second potential danger, we note that the threats to psychological well-being posed by easy access to the Net are significant and ought to be taken seriously, but conclude that these threats are likely counterbalanced by other respects in which easy access to the Internet can enhance the psychological health of its users. Having considered these two potential threats increased ICT penetration poses to Kazakhstan, we conclude that it is appropriate to be optimistic, albeit cautiously so, about the Republic of Kazakhstan's aggressive development of heightened ICT penetration.

The threat of virtual colonisation and the erosion of kazakh culture

By «virtual colonisation» is meant the possibility that an indigenous national culture might be significantly eroded or overwhelmed by foreign cultures that exert a disproportionate influence on the structure and content of the Web. As D. Uffelman notes, in the case of Kazakhstan this threat is not merely the result of western (and particularly U.S.) influence on the content on the Web, but is also a result of the extensive penetration of the Russian controlled Internet, Runet [17]. Given the history of actual colonization of Kazakh territory by Russian and Soviet Empires, the threat of a cultural «virtual» colonization by foreign powers is one to which the Kazakh people are rightly sensitive, one worth taking seriously and one worth taking steps to counteract. Nonetheless, while the threat is one that must be monitored, it is not a decisive critique of the upsurge in Internet penetration in Kazakhstan.

In addition to the benefits such penetration promise to the development of intellectual capital and commerce – and which are not the specific focus of this essay – there are unique features of Kazakh culture that constitute significant respects in which the culture is well-situated to incorporate widespread access to and use of the Internet. In this section, we sketch several such features of Kazakh culture.

The first aspect of contemporary Kazakh culture worth noting in this connection is its celebration of the Islamic intellectual tradition. As M. Y. Omelicheva notes, the practice of Islam is thriving in contemporary Kazakhstan and its roots are very old and have a decidedly intellectual and non-doctrinaire orientation [11]. This feature of Kazakh culture is evident in the degree of attention devoted to members of the falsafa tradition, including al-Kindī, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sīnā, and, particularly, al-Fārābī. The latter's prominence in contemporary Kazakh culture is partly a function of the fact that the best evidence suggests his place of birth as Fārāb, Transoxiana, a town corresponding to Otrar located in the southern region of contemporary Kazakhstan [4, p. 111]. Because of this origin, the Kazakh people are proud to claim Al-Fārābī as a native son, a pride evident in the fact that the flagship institution of the Kazakh system of higher education – Al-Fārābī Kazakh National University – bears the name of this seminal figure in the falsafa tradition. The relevance of the falsafa tradition and its prevalence in contemporary Kazakh culture to the topic of this essay is that the falsafa tradition was marked by openness to information from other nations and cultures, including, of course, Hellenistic sources [1, 5]. Moreover, the openness to alien intellectual traditions was not confined to the appropriation and development of the thought of the Ancient Greeks; rather, it was a principled commitment to the use of reason to acquire knowledge irrespective of the source of that knowledge. This principled openness to finding knowledge in foreign sources is expressed most forcefully by one of the founding figures of the falsafa movement, Abu Yusuf Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Kindī. In his work, *On First Philosophy*, al-Kindī encourages the reader to use reason to search for the truth, «even if it should emanate from races distant from us and nations different from us. For nothing is more fulfilling for the seeker of truth than [the pursuit] of truth itself» [5, p.28]. The Internet, of course, is a medium that lends itself to exposing individuals to the views of races and

nations different from themselves; thus, it is a fitting technological extension of the falsafic commitment to openness to the thought of other nations and cultures. Moreover, the fact that this tradition of openness to the thought of others is a rational openness and thus tempered by rational criticism can act as a check on the danger that Kazakh culture will be overwhelmed by the Western cultures that saturate the Internet.

A second reason that Kazakh Culture is well-situated to benefit from the widespread availability of the Internet hinges on information flowing on the Web in the other direction from that described in the preceding paragraph, and it is grounded in the Kazakh tradition of hospitality and generosity. Rooted in its Nomadic history when the offering of hospitality to travelers could be a matter of life and death and not a mere pleasantry, contemporary Kazakhs continue the tradition of welcoming foreigners into their homes. In addition to it being a reflection of their deep sense of charity to visitors, the Kazakhs see such hospitality as a chance to introduce distinctive Kazakh culture to their guests [20, pp. 83-87]. What the Internet provides is a way for Kazakhs to manifest this side of the Kazakh tradition of hospitality – exposing foreigners to the distinctive features of Kazakh culture – beyond the boundaries of Kazakhstan. Such cyber-sharing is, of course, a poor substitute for an elaborate Kazakh dinner spanning several hours, numerous toasts and perhaps even the playing of a dombra; nonetheless, it does increase the chances that foreigners will be able to learn about Kazakh customs and traditions.

A third reason that Kazakh Culture is well-disposed to benefit from high Internet penetration is the importance of extended families in Kazakh Tradition. This is particularly true of the male members of the family where the tradition of *atabalasy* – the «rule of grandfathers and sons» – dictates that newly married adult sons and their wives live with the son's parents for a period, with the youngest son along with his wife and family taking up permanent residence with the son's parents [20, pp. 49-53]. The Internet is able to support this tradition of close and extended family relationships in two respects. First, as Alvin Toffler predicted and as is being borne out by empirical data, the Internet increases opportunities to work at home and thereby decreases the pressure to move away from one's extended family in order to pursue employment [16, 3, 6]. Second, as V. P. Terin notes, for those who are

forced to move away from their extended families, the Internet allows for real-time interactions with family members who are geographically distant [15]. The capacity of the Internet to help preserve connections with geographically distant family members is particularly salient in the extensive availability of video-chat, an application that allows for real-time interactions in two sensory modalities; namely, hearing and vision.

Thus far, we have made the case that there is *prima facie* reason to believe that the unique features of Kazakh Culture indicate that a high degree of Internet penetration in the society can actually do more to advance than it does to diminish traditional Kazakh culture. What we have not addressed, however, are any potential threats extensive Internet penetration might pose that are not related directly to the worry about cultural erosion discussed in this section. One particularly significant threat about which many have expressed concern is that the widespread availability of the Internet can result in individuals spending an inordinate amount of time on-line and that this, in turn, will lead to increased isolation and, in at least some cases, depression. In the next section, we consider this threat, suggesting in the end that there is reason to believe that the Internet may do more to alleviate isolation and depression than it does to increase or perpetuate them.

ICT penetration and mental health

A naturally occurring worry about ICT penetration and its implications for mental health is the following: Ease of access to the Internet will increase the amount of time people spend on-line and thereby decrease the amount of time they spend interacting directly with other human beings. The greater isolation that results from this decrease in proximate interactions with embodied others will, in turn, lead to an increase in the frequency of loneliness and depression; thus, it is reasonable to expect that the increased availability of the Internet will result in a greater incidence of depression. Roughly this worry is common in literature on the potential negative psychological implications of excessive Internet use, including some that have begun making an empirical case for the correlation [12, 14, 19]. Even a cursory survey of this literature reveals that the worry over isolation and depression resulting from an inordinate amount of time spent on-line is not a frivolous worry. Potential triggers

of depression should be noted and steps should be taken to mitigate these threats wherever they emerge, including on the Internet. Consequently, our purpose in this section is not to dispute the claim that inordinate use of the Internet can result in isolation and depression. What we do question, however, is the suggestion that the net effect of the widespread availability and use of the Internet will be an overall increase in personal isolation and cases of severe depression. Below, we outline four considerations supporting our skepticism concerning the general conclusion that the Internet will, on balance, have the effect of producing greater isolation and depression.

The first, and in our judgment most important, consideration is the growing body of literature showing that the Internet can play a significant role in treating and thus remediating cases of depression [7, 13, 18]. This potential use of the Internet holds great promise, of course, for expanding the means of available treatment for those suffering from depression, including the possibility of extending this treatment to more rural communities where there may be no or very limited access to a professional therapist. Moreover, widespread access to the Internet may increase the number of those who, already suffering from depression, will diagnose their condition and seek treatment given the availability of psychiatric web-sites – such as, for instance, that maintained by the APA (The American Psychological Association) – that include articles and videos discussing the signs of various psychological conditions and tools for finding a therapist. For an example of one such resource, see reference [10].

The second consideration is one mentioned in the previous section; that is, the Internet can facilitate the health of significant interpersonal relationships that are challenged by geographic dislocation. Though we focused on family in our earlier remarks, this is no less true of love relationships and friendships that are disrupted by one or both of the parties moving to an area distant from that in which the relationship first developed. The Internet, through social media and video-chat, provides profound resources for sustaining significant interpersonal relationships over great geographic distances.

A third consideration counting against the claim that the dominant tendency of the Internet is to inhibit and not support social engagement is the possibility of civic engagement via e-participation

in government. Such participation, of course, is possible only with a robust ICT system in place. Moreover, a correlation between ICT development and e-participation is not mere conceptual speculation, a point illustrated by the Republic of Kazakhstan itself. As Åström et. al. note, Kazakhstan saw a dramatic increase in the UN's ranking of their e-participation index in the period from 2003 – 2010, precisely the period in which Kazakhstan was experiencing its upsurge in ICT penetration. It would, of course, be overly simplistic to believe that making the Internet widely available leads automatically to an increase in e-participation in government. Åström et. al. recognize that a country's degree of e-participation depends upon numerous other factors as well, including degree of economic globalization and the degree to which the country is non-democratic where, perhaps counterintuitively, non-democratic regimes experienced a greater surge in e-participation ranking than democratic ones over the period in question [2]; nonetheless, what is undeniable is that the rise in e-participation that occurred in Kazakhstan would not have been possible without a prior increase in ICT penetration. Thus, increased availability of the Internet is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for an increase in e-participation in civic matters and can thereby diminish the worry that the dominant tendency of the Net is to produce social isolation.

Finally, it bears noting that there is empirical evidence showing that Internet use can act to promote healthy inter-personal skills. In a study of 324 junior high school students, M. Zorofi found a positive correlation between Internet use and the development of such social skills as impulse control and appropriate confidence in one's interactions with others [21].

The upshot of these considerations is not a decisive case that the Internet will certainly prove to be salutary on the whole with respect to promoting mental health. The points at which the Internet intersects human mental health and interpersonal relations are numerous and multi-faceted. Moreover, the history of human engagement with the Internet is barely in its infancy and the evolution of the mental health implications of this engagement will likely take unexpected turns as its history unfolds. Nonetheless, the considerations outlined above provide several reasons to be skeptical of the claim that the Internet's effect on human mental health will be deleterious on balance.

Conclusion

In evaluating the Republic of Kazakhstan's program of rapid development of Internet access, it is important to consider social implications beyond those related to commerce and the development of intellectual capital. Among the most salient additional implications that should be addressed are potential deleterious effects on Kazakhstan's distinctive culture and the mental health of its citizens. In this essay, we made the case that these concerns do

not count decisively against the Kazakh program of dramatically increasing its ICT penetration. Indeed, we have provided several reasons to believe that a high degree of Internet availability and Kazakh culture complement each other in several respects. Moreover, we have argued that while the inordinate use of the Internet may have a negative impact on the mental health of certain users, there is good reason to believe that the impact of extensive Internet availability on the mental health of Kazakh citizens will, on balance, be positive.

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