Patterns of Technology Use in Central Asia

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Research Overview

How are information and communication technologies used in digitally emergent societies, that is, regions that have existing telecommunication systems but not digital and pervasive ones? The Central Asia + Information and Communication Technologies (CAICT) project in the Department of Technical Communication is conducting a five-year study of the transformative effects of information technology on society in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Researchers employ a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods to gather and analyze data that contributes to our understanding of changing patterns of use and attitudes towards technology. This research is supported by the National Science Foundation (Grant #NSF-0326101).

Culture

Central Asia’s amalgam of Soviet legacies and traditional Asian culture creates a distinctive environment of information seeking and attitudes toward technology. Social networks are commonly used for acquiring goods and information. Uzbeks, for example, trust information from their friends and family significantly more than information from official media.

Mobile Phone Use

A qualitative study of mobile phone use in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, was conducted in March 2004. The three study components were:
- Observations in public spaces.
- Interviews with mobile service providers.
- Interviews with mobile phone users and non-users, including young people (aged 18-21) and businessmen.

We found that people use technology to support existing cultural norms and values such as family interaction. Other characteristics of use include:
- Relatively minimal, brief use of mobile phones in public spaces.
- Conspicuous display of mobile phones in upscale restaurants.
- Men appearing to use mobile phones outside more than women.
- Young people treating their mobile phones with care because they are expensive.
- Young people feeling parents give them mobile phones to “control” their movements.

Technology and Policy

The five countries of Central Asia vary widely in terms of their infrastructure and adoption of ICTs. Mobile phones, computers, and Internet access are very expensive relative to average incomes. Many mobile phones and computers are unofficially imported from other countries.

An analysis of existing data regarding three countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan—showed that although governments in the five countries are more or less equally authoritarian, ICT policies vary. Richer regimes, such as Kazakhstan, do not need foreign aid to develop ICT infrastructure and thus are free to pursue more repressive ICT policies. Reliance on foreign aid seems to lead to more open ICT policies and can have democratizing effects on electronic media.

Public Internet Access

A 2003 survey showed that more than half of Uzbekistan’s computer users get access to the Internet at Internet cafes. Since summer 2004, CAICT researchers have collected data on users and equipment at public sites. This longitudinal study will continue for three more years at sites in all five Central Asian republics.

CAICT Project Web Site
http://depts.washington.edu/caict/