
Hack the Turkmenet! The Journalistic Challenge in Central Asia

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Central Asia is a region of unique and idiosyncratic journalistic conditions, ranging from the infrastructural to the ideological; at times almost too peculiar for comparison to the rest of the planet; at times deeply illuminating of worldwide trends. Free speech activists in the region even go so far as to envision Central Asia as the ‘canary in the coal mine’ with respect to the world’s—and in particular, the liberal democratic West’s—commitment to combating censorship; while professional journalists, such as the two authors of this paper, find the region an addictive puzzle, one that challenges us to constantly innovate epistemologically and methodologically.

We will begin with an introduction to Central Asia and provide an overview of its journalistic conditions. Our case study is from Turkmenistan, arguably the region’s most notorious country given its status as, according to many experts, the world’s second-most totalitarian regime (after North Korea). The case study specifically deals with the ‘Turkmenet’, the Turkmen-language online community largely derived from Turkmenistanis. Albeit tiny—not even 2 per cent of Turkmenistan’s approximately five million inhabitants are wired, and the cost of internet access can be as high as US\$6900 a month (Internet World Statistics 2010; British Broadcasting Corporation 2012)—the emergence of the Turkmenet has nonetheless been occasion for moderate triumphalism among digital idealists, who see in it the inexorable march of free society; and joy among journalists, as it has opened up cracks in the otherwise impenetrable façade of Turkmenistani state censorship. Nevertheless, it is not free from repression, even predation: we recount the struggles of the Turkmenet against an enigmatic pro-government ‘hacktivist’ during the period July to November 2011. His attacks—which first targeted the news sites *Chronicles of Turkmenistan* and *NewEurasia Citizen Media* (the latter being the website of the two authors) and then expanded to include hundreds of regular Turkmen internet users—occurred shortly after a mysterious munitions depot explosion in Abadan (a suburb of the Turkmenistani capital, Ashgabat), about which the Turkmenet played a crucial role in providing information.

THE CENTRAL ASIAN MEDIASCAPE

The five Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan lie at several geopolitical, linguistic, cultural and conceptual crossroads. Rubbing shoulders with three of history’s most important civilisations (Iran, China and Russia), bestriding Afghanistan and a stone’s throw from the European Union, the region is a complex tapestry of Slavic, Turkic, Farsic, Mongolian and Sinic ingredients. It has served as the axis of power for Buddhism, Islam and Marxism; literally providing the blood and bread of these movements. Today, its struggles with liberalisation and democratisation—usually failing but sometimes successful—are critically important tests of the viability of these values and institutions beyond their original Western crucible.

The five Central Asian states find themselves in a difficult dialectic between the outer forces of global capitalism and integration, and the inner forces of their Soviet and Islamic heritages. Newcomers to the region will be immediately struck by the demographic and infrastructural fragmentation, all carefully designed by Moscow to prevent precisely what ended up occurring— independence. What is harder to see, however, is the Soviet legacy in terms of behaviours, particularly *informational* behaviours. Consider: these are societies that were for generations succoured on media that was pedagogical, ideological, and often in denial, where too much classical music on the radio meant there was a crisis—Tchaikovsky’s ‘Swan Lake’ signalled the death of a leader; and on 19 August 1991, it signalled the death of the Soviet Union. Content may change, as well as values. Gone today is the shared destiny of 15 nations merged into a *homo sovieticus*, replaced now with the Altyn Asyr (Golden Age) or the glittering future embodied in the city of Astana. Yet, media forms and informational habits persist—morph, mutate, adapt. When the Abadan explosion occurred, the regularly scheduled news programs were reportedly substituted by Turkmen pop music (Schwartz 2012).

Press freedom and independent journalism are useful threads to measure the rest of the Central Asian carpet. Of the 179 countries ranked on Reporters Sans Frontières’ Press Freedom indices during the past three years, the region has an average rank of 149th (see Reporters Sans Frontières 2010; Reporters Sans Frontières 2012). Internet penetration, that harbinger of information access and globalisation, is another important but often disconcerting thread: as of December 2011, the region has an average landline internet penetration rate of 22.62 per cent (Internet World Statistics 2012). Since 2010, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have

boasted the deepest penetration per capita, but with the exception of Kazakhstan, which can boast the geographically *widest* (although still very limited) distribution (OpenNet Initiative 2010), landline internet access is largely concentrated in major and secondary urban centres (EurasiaNet.org 2007)—which also happen to be infrastructural hubs. There is hope, though, in mobile internet: by 2010, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan had already reportedly neared full mobile penetration (Central Asia Economy Newswire 2010), and anecdotal evidence from the field strongly suggests Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are deeply saturated with handheld devices (Schwartz 2011c). The situation is such that Business Monitor International reported in Spring 2011, rather sunnily, that ‘mobile broadband services ... will make a strong contribution to the growth of internet services in Central Asia’ (Business Monitor International 2011). Nevertheless, given the politicisation of telecommunications in the region—in which, for example, WordPress can suffer a massive ban in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan because of the content on just *two* of its blogs (Schwartz 2011b), or when an entire Russian mobile phone service provider can have its operations suddenly and inexplicably suspended in Turkmenistan (Turkmen 2010b), not to mention frequent censorship, snooping and manipulation by intelligence services across the entire region (Kendzior 2012; Agence France-Presse 2011)—clearly this a thread still very much in the process of being sewn into the carpet.

What statistics do not capture, however, are the ways in which ‘press freedom’, much less ‘independent journalism’, are treated as philosophical concepts in Central Asia. Journalists in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are ‘free’ to report upon anything they like, but that doesn’t mean they will professionally prosper—or even survive, as highlighted by the tragedy of Alisher Saipov, who was mysteriously shot three times at point blank range in the southern Kyrgyzstani city of Osh in 2007. As for ‘independence’, this is often superficially taken to mean mere *variety*. For example, in Kazakhstan, this concept can actually cover up Rupert Murdoch-like media hoarding, as most of the private media outlets are believed to be owned or otherwise controlled by family members and associates of President Nursultan Nazarbayev (International Foundation for Protection of Freedom of Speech [Adil Soz] 2009). In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, like other developing democracies, media outlets suffer much in the way of indirect but very real government pressure; or they are either affiliated with, or even the mouthpieces of, powerful individuals, organisations and political parties (Almazbekova & Toktobaeva 2012; Anara 2011; Wolters 2011). Nevertheless, the relative increase in per capita income in Kazakhstan and the fractured governance of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan generally serve to create a space for relative journalistic freedom and independence in these countries—a space that is all but missing in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, two countries considered among the world’s most oppressive and corrupt countries by Transparency International (Kurczy 2010).

There is some plurality of news sources and information venues allowed in Uzbekistan, but these are widely suspected of being lures for malcontents laid by Uzbekistani intelligence, or ploys to incite popular anger implemented by the Uzbekistani opposition in exile (a noteworthy example of this was a recent suicide on Facebook, that appears to have been possibly fake (Kendzior 2011)). No wonder, then, that these tend to be avoided by the general public and even a great deal of the professional middle class. It should also be noted that the Uzbekistani regime manages its own Facebook rip-off called ‘Muloqot’—actually, quite a good rip-off in terms of design, but, as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reporters discovered, one also conspicuously clean of ‘controversial’ content (Allnut 2011).

In Turkmenistan, meanwhile, critical media outlets of any type are simply unavailable, as the government has maintained a stunning and disturbing amount of control over the press since the forced closure of the country’s only two independent newspapers in 1992 (Turkmen 2010a). All media is committed to one mission: promoting the ‘Altyn Asyr’ (‘Golden Age’) that the nation’s two presidents have miraculously brought about. Television shows are devoted to the exploits of the president or mythological heroes from the past; and newspapers, despite their different names, routinely run the same content *verbatim*—a veritable echo chamber (Kucera 2007). This has had a pronounced psychological effect upon Turkmen audiences. In the words of ‘Adalat Seeker’, a young journalist and editor of the underground e-newsletter *Alternative Turkmenistan News*:

The public of Turkmenistan ... views reporters as traitors, agents of foreign intelligence. They think those who tell negative information, especially to the overseas public, sell [that is, are selling out] Turkmenistan. In their understanding, journalism equals praising, telling only the good things, and journalists are servants who write what they are ordered to write (Seeker 2011).

Meanwhile, what is the rest of the world doing? Covering all five countries are several non-profit and for-profit news agencies, most notably Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), the Ferghana Information Agency (better known by its former URL, Ferghana.ru), EurasiaNet.org, NewEurasia (also known by its URL, Neweurasia.net), and *Transitions* magazine, the news and analysis wing of the media-development organisation Transitions Online (TOL). There are many country-specific operations, notably Kloop.kg in Kyrgyzstan (which also doubles as a blogging platform) and the *Chronicles of Turkmenistan* (*Хроника Туркменистана*, also known by its URL, Chrono-tm.org). The major internationals, such as Global Voices Online, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), the BBC, Al-Jazeera, and RT (Russia Today), not to mention several major Western dailies, also have a presence—again, typically in Almaty and Bishkek. Finally, there is also a ubiquity of satellite-broadcast media leaking their way into all the countries (even Turkmenistan), particularly from Russia, Iran, Turkey and China. These are able to neatly circumvent the need for relay stations on the ground, as they can be beamed directly into households (Hawkes 2012; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2011b; Freedom House 2011; Najibullah 2008; Civil Initiative on Internet Policy 2008).

But many agencies are experiencing what seems like never-ending budgetary and personnel cuts. Some organisations—such as TOL, EurasiaNet.org, NewEurasia, and even Global Voices Online—are particularly vulnerable, but even the heavy

hitters—such as RFE/RL and the BBC’s Central Asia bureaux—are having to make increasingly impossible decisions about their future. Others are turning to the dubious strategy of relying upon single correspondents to cover the *entire* region, and worse, often at merely part- or half-time status or on woefully limited retainers. When the journalists complain to their respective headquarters, they are met with harsh replies that Central Asia is ‘marginal’ and ‘unimportant’. Meanwhile, watchdog and activist groups, such as Reporters Sans Frontières, also maintain a presence in the region, but this is usually by way of contractors and researchers, not full offices. Consequently, with even the ‘idealists’ acting as though the region does not merit more of their concentration and resources, many members of Central Asia’s Western and Western-oriented journalist community feel that the West and the world in general are leaving the region to its own devices.

Those in the region who are determined to get relatively objective news, as well as achieve uncensored internet access, are increasingly turning to citizen journalism and user-generated/user-disseminated content; that is, blog posts, tweets, videos, or articles that their friends have deemed interesting, valuable or trustworthy. For example, NewEurasia has in the past received as many as 100 000 unique readers per month, of which roughly speaking over a quarter are from the region, another quarter from Russia, and the rest from around the world, particularly the West. (This data comes from NewEurasia’s private Google Analytics account, which has been active since 2007. However, it needs to be said that data from this service can be inaccurate and also that the authors’ account has been disrupted twice—first by their website relaunch in mid-2009, and then by what appears to have been a medium-sized ‘spam attack’ in mid-2011). It stands within reason these readers are mostly Central Asian, either in-region (typically via proxy server) or in the diaspora.

Meanwhile, there is a rising new breed of for-profit social media and blogging sites, such as Ertir.com in Turkmenistan and Diesel.elcat.kg in Kyrgyzstan. These sites are often taking citizen journalistic/crowdsourcing turns. For the moment, it appears to be impossible to provide solid numbers on the growth of this new media in the region. Blogs could be one marker, but surprisingly, there are no good statistics available on global growth rates of blogging, much less for Central Asia. We know that as of February 2011, there were 156 million registered blogs in the world (The Nielsen Company 2011), but it is impossible to determine how many of these are Central Asian. Nonetheless, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that new media, whatever its true scale in the region, is fast becoming a force to be reckoned with. For example, Kyrgyzstan’s political and ethnic upheavals in April and June 2010 were apparently facilitated by blogs and Twitter (Melvin & Umaraliev 2011). This may seem remarkable in view of the fact that only 39.8 per cent of the country had internet access at the time, until we consider that ‘wired’ individuals were crucially placed in Bishkek and Osh, where they could play crucial organisational roles.

Finally, what needs to be watched is the increasing sophistication and division of Central Asian audiences’ media consciousness. There are two sides to this development. On the one hand, there appears to be an ongoing digitalisation of Central Asia’s long tradition of the *chaikhana*—the teahouse (from *chai*, meaning tea). As this tradition goes online, its role in the development of civil society in the region is increasingly comparable to the eighteenth-century British coffeehouses and French salons as described by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas; namely, of an ‘inclusive critical discussion, free of social and economic pressures, in which interlocutors treat each other as equals in a cooperative attempt to reach an understanding on matters of common’ (Bohman 2011). On the other hand, though, older generations can remember the transition from Soviet to national mass media, and many of them grew cynical of what was, in essence, merely a shift of values, not of overall message. Even if they can get their hands onto the content from the internet, they are likely to have knee-jerk distrust for this as ‘just more propaganda’ (or worse).

The rising young, meanwhile, are complex people. In Turkmenistan, for instance, a combination of rapidly declining Russian language fluency and an education system warped around the mystical rantings of the country’s first president and dictator, Saparmurat Niyazov, seems to have created *more* credulity rather less; while in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the situation is starting to look distressingly like that in the USA, as audiences become consumers, and the media landscape begins to become polluted by preference—if not downright bias—in the pursuit of agenda and private gain. The emerging *cyber-chaikhana* may only be serving to increase this problem, precisely because of its freewheeling, unregulated nature and democratic ‘all truths [opinions] are created equally’ character. Thus, whatever the merits or demerits of the concept of journalistic objectivity, which is so often an illusion or a mask for bad journalistic behaviour, casting the principle off altogether is arguably the most disturbing development of all in Central Asia’s unique mediascape.



AN 'UNKNOWNTURKMEN'S' ATTACK ON THE CYBER-CHAIKHANA

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On 7 July 2011, beginning around 4.45pm local time, massive blasts occurred in Abadan, raining munitions down upon the city and even as far as the Kopet Dag mountain range 20km to the south. The government claims only two soldiers and 13 civilians were killed, but opposition groups and independent media assert that an entire neighbourhood was caught in the blast zone, decimating it and killing as many as 1300 people (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2011a). To this day, the event is veiled in secrecy, with the government having come up with various explanations, including denying that a munitions depot was even involved and claiming that a fireworks warehouse spontaneously combusted due to intense summer heat (Turkmen 2011b).

The authorities, however, would have preferred simply to have pretended that the explosion never even happened; the fact that the outside world knew that it did has everything to do with the Turkmenet's efforts on the evening of the blast and over the subsequent days to get the word out on the catastrophe. Among the content that Turkmen internet users managed to spread were first-person testimonies of residents from the armoury neighbourhood and videos taken in Ashgabat during and after the explosion. *Chronicles of Turkmenistan* and NewEurasia were instrumental in helping this content make its way onto the wider internet and eventually into the hands of major news agencies (see for example Al Jazeera 2012).

Then, early in the morning of 18 July (that is, around late morning/early afternoon in Turkmenistan), NewEurasia received the following email from an individual called '0fx0':

Dear press,

I have 2 news for you, one good, one bad.

First bad:

You will no longer be able to access the chrono-tm.org website! OMG NOoo!! :-(

Good news is, we are releasing their database, including list of subscribers, email addresses of comment authors, unpublished comments, etc etc ...

Here is the first part, enjoy!

http://XXXXXXXXXX

Stay tuned, we'll have more good and bad news for you!!

NewEurasia examined the URL (which has been anonymised in this case study) and did indeed discover a full database. The *Chronicles*' website was inaccessible, and remained so for several days afterward. It was clear—and the *Chronicles* later confirmed—that they had experienced a devastating penetration of their website and then suffered a denial of service (DoS) attack. We should note that although the email was addressed generally—that is, to the press—NewEurasia learned that no other news agency or commentary outlet had received the email. This suggested that NewEurasia was itself considered for attack, but for one reason or another was instead made to serve as a witness. The question is whether this attack originated with the government, as naturally suspected. Unfortunately, that could not be confirmed, and it is likely that it never can be. However, context is important: in a press release, the *Chronicles* noted the timing of this attack with threatening remarks from the Turkmenistani Foreign Ministry alluding to websites 'disseminating deliberately misleading information' and daily visits by special police officers to the house of the website editor's mother, who lives in Turkmenistan (Schwartz 2011a). The *Chronicles* incident would soon prove to be just the first in a wave of online incidents that would eventually become associated with an individual (or group posing as an individual) called 'unknownturkmen'. (Note that the denonym 'Turkmen' in English can be both singular or plural, for example 'a Turkmen' or 'those Turkmen', although sometimes in English it is pluralised into 'Turkmens' to make the distinction more apparent. Sometimes the name 'unknownturkmen' would appear affiliated with an entity called the 'mr empire hack team', suggesting that more than one individual was involved, or conversely, that one individual wished to present himself or herself as a group).

In the months following the attack against the *Chronicles*, NewEurasia's Turkmenistan division received off-the-record accounts of further hackings, this time against the personal accounts of several prominent Turkmen journalists and human rights activists. NewEurasia's own Turkmenistan editor (and one of the two authors of this article) witnessed the mouse on her laptop suddenly come to life in front of her, clicking on folders and quite clearly looking for sensitive material, unaware

that she was watching (or, conversely, completely aware, with the desire to frighten her). Again, context must be noted: around this time, the authoritarian President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, had abruptly invited opposition figures to return from exile so as to run for office in presidential elections set for early 2012 (needless to say, none of them returned, and the elections resulted in a landslide majority vote for the incumbent).

As autumn came, hackings targeting email accounts began to shift toward regular people not otherwise involved in journalism or activism. At this point, a face of sorts began to emerge as the figure responsible for the attacks—unknownturkmen. The individual/group began to appear regularly on the online forum Etir.com, using a hooded man shrouded in darkness as their icon. They appeared adept at exploiting the peculiar policy and experiential conditions of the Turkmenet. For example, social media remains both very new and exotic in the country. One of the websites that pioneered it in the period 2009–10, called Teswirler.com, had been shut down in mid-2011 and reborn as Etir.com. Yet, many Turkmenet users were not aware of the change. unknownturkmen created a fake version of the old Teswirler.com website to lure unsuspecting users into relinquishing their personal data and exposing their computers to malware—a classic phishing scam. Meanwhile, on Ertir.com, they employed another thinly veiled phishing scam, this time around exploiting the fact that many external social networks such as Facebook are banned or otherwise very difficult to access from within Turkmenistan. They announced:

On behalf of TmDesign Group, we intend to open a new social site. As you know, Mail.ru agent in Turkmenistan has begun to show various failures and spams. We aim to open a site that would substitute Mail.ru [as well as] Facebook, Odnoklassniki and other social sites. We are collecting people for testing the site. Since work has not been finished, you could tell us our mistakes. You can connect with us through Facebook. If you have no Facebook membership, you can access us via XXXXXXXXX. The URL address of our site is XXXXXXXXXX.

And even earlier, unknownturkmen launched what seemed suspiciously like an intelligence campaign against Turkmenet-based malcontents, real and potential:

Hi, how are you? I just joined and hope to befriend myself with you. The reason I came is by no means coincidental. As you all know there was a shooting incident in Ashgabat between two men and the Turkmen authorities. They said that one of the men had died and the other was arrested. This is a lie! He was not arrested. If you want to see under what conditions Arslan has been hidden from the people [that is, of Turkmenistan], check out the pictures that I have collected for you. I don't want to violate the rules of this site by showing these photos here. I prepared a slide show; if you want to download it, the address is XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX. Share this link if you want to know what this government has done.

This post proved particularly devastating, as over 500 Turkmenet users—approximately 0.6 per cent of the entire Turkmenet—took the bait and ended up downloading a virus file that overloaded their computers with a flood of programs opening rapidly one after the other. (Note that these translations previously appeared in Turkmen 2011a).

These posts occurred before the username became associated with the attacks against the *Chronicles*' website, a linkage that was made by unknownturkmen themselves in communiqués with NewEurasia's Turkmenistan editor and her colleagues around November 2011, at the height of the disruptions they were causing on the Turkmenet. Unfortunately, it is the nature of the beast that these claims could not be corroborated. However, there were small clues in language and character pointing to the possibility that there was indeed at least one personality behind many of these incidents and 0fx0. Among other things, this individual consistently portrayed himself as an arch-nationalist and true believer in the Turkmenistani political system, who was seeing it as his duty to purge the Turkmenet of those he considered enemies of the Turkmen people—or, in other words, dissenters, malcontents, and people who simply wanted information not pre-approved by the government. There were inconsistencies, however, and at least one Turkmenet user adept at digital evasion and detection methods came to suspect that the individual was based in Russia and probably hired by the government.

In fact, neither possibility—patriotic fanaticism or mercenary opportunism—are impossible in the kind of totalitarian *Lebenswelt* that pervades Turkmenistan; in fact, for the moment, this case study's authors are inclined to believe that unknownturkmen may have embodied *both* possibilities. This is because the Turkmenistani regime certainly has the technological capacities to wreak the kind of havoc that ripped through the Turkmenet at the time.

Since 2007, Ashgabat has been importing top-grade Western spy technology, often under the cover of modernising its telecommunications infrastructure. The most notorious purchase occurred in 2007, when the regime bought the straightforwardly named 'Intelligence Platform' from the German company Siemens (now the Finnish-German Nokia Siemens). According to the product's brochure, which has been made available to the public by *Privacy International* and *WikiLeaks*, this product enables 'intelligence mining', including pattern recognition, pattern profiling and link analysis in mobile phone usage, bank transactions and e-mails, and most disturbingly, full text recovery of e-mails, SMSs and chat transcripts (Gabriel 2007, pp. 18–20). The software architecture makes intelligence mining scalable, from one person to entire populations (Gabriel 2007, p. 43). Siemens would show up again in mid-2011, when it teamed with China's Huawei Technologies and signed an agreement with the state ministry Turkmentelekom to improve the national cell phone system and provide better-quality services.

Earlier, in December 2011, *WikiLeaks* and the ZAPP program of Norddeutscher Rundfunk uncovered evidence that a British-German company, Gamma Interational, had been selling much more frightening spy technology to the Turkmenistani regime (and even went so far as to travel to the country to carry out technical preparations for installation) (ZAPP 2011; see

also Trilling 2012). In particular, Ashgabat bought the 'FinFisher Suite'. The FinFisher range of products are designed to covertly install malicious software (malware) onto a user's computer or mobile phone, typically by tricking the person, for example by posing as an Apple iTunes update. Once the user's machine is infected, the malware allows full access to the information held on it—even *hijacking* the machine remotely, as NewEurasia's Turkmenistan editor appears to have experienced.

After the presidential election in February 2012, which was widely condemned in the West as fraudulent, unknownturkmen faded away. Private communiqués between them, journalists and other Turkmenet users continued until some time in mid-2012, when they seemed to fall completely silent. Their legacy, however, shall not go mute anytime soon: the Turkmenet is a changed place, both more hardened and more cautious, constantly looking over its shoulder. Intriguingly, unknownturkmen appear to have inspired their own opposite: some Turkmenet users have begun distinguishing between 'white' and 'black' hackers, with the former trying to bypass the government's heavy censorship of the internet, and ready to share their methods and tools for free with their fellow internet users. Among these tools has been a hacked version of the mobile browser Opera Mini 6.0 adapted to Turkmenet conditions and nicknamed 'Turkmen Opera'. It has in-built proxying, so the amateur Turkmenet user does not need to be a coder in order to use it. Similarly, there has also appeared a hacked Turkmen-language version of the Russian email service Mail.ru, use of which sometimes carries concern over deep packet inspections (DPI) of communications by Russia (whose government would not be above sharing sensitive user information with the Turkmenistani regime if they calculated a good reason for doing so).

CONCLUSION

The Turkmenet is by no means a 'normal' corner of the internet because of the unique conditions being imposed upon it from the offline world. The simple fact that there are no laws in Turkmenistan protecting IT user rights makes Turkmenet users vulnerable for such attacks, and many website designers and managers simply lack the security skills to ward them off. One can speak existentially about digital life in Turkmenistan: the Turkmenet operates under constant fear of spying, and rapidly there is growing awareness that the very tools which could possibly enlighten or even liberate Turkmenistani society might also be used to inflict terror and control over it as well. Big Brother really *is* watching. Further, in autumn 2011, two third-semester students were evicted from the Transportation Institute because of politically critical remarks they wrote in a Turkmen-language chat forum. In a sense, this incident is a totalitarian caricature of the kind of troubles people increasingly find themselves in for writing nasty remarks about their bosses on Facebook.

To conclude: what lessons may be drawn from the experience of the Turkmenet for the future of journalism in the region? To be sure, a bumpy road lies ahead. The cyber-chaikhana represented by digital new media is no panacea—to the contrary, the chai it offers can often be poisoned. At the same time, however, there is much more information than ever before coming out from the region. That journalists covering Turkmenistan could have as exciting, interesting, and indeed dangerous and illuminating a story to tell as that of unknownturkmen—and is it not often the case that the most illuminating information is also the most dangerous?—was a sheer impossibility only a few years ago. For many in the profession covering the region, that's a cup of chai worth drinking, even with arsenic.

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