

Of States and Borders on the Internet: The role of domain name extensions in expressions of nationalism online

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Abstract

The space on the internet is easily traversable and state boundaries in the form of domain extensions can be crossed with no more effort than a click of a mouse. Yet, what might such traversals of imagined state boundaries on the internet mean to the people doing the traversing? This question is especially relevant when considering people from Kazakhstan, a country where notions of statehood and nationalism are contested and are in the process of being renegotiated. Results presented here suggest that residents of Kazakhstan are acutely aware of national boundary traversals as they navigate the internet. The naming of a state-controlled space on the internet, through the use of ccTLDs, does in fact matter to the average user. Citizens of Kazakhstan often identified their activity on the internet as happening within or outside the space of the state to which they felt allegiance and attachment. We argue that naming matters for the creation of not only imagined communities online but also for individual expressions of nationalism on the internet.

Keywords: Nationalism, ethnic identity, democracy, internet use

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, sometimes without even knowing that they are doing so (Johnson & Post 1996). Political science and policy scholars have written about this ease of state border traversals online in both concerned and exalted terms, ranging from evaluations of censorship and state control to promises of the withering of the state. Although some saw the internet as a perfect instantiation of globalization (Deibert 2000), what Lessig called “the ideal libertarian society” (2006, 2), others pointed out that nations and borders are not going anywhere, but they are present from both technological and economic points of view (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.

Although geographical borders function as physical manifestations of state power, borders also serve as symbolic representations of statehood to citizen and non-citizen alike (Garcia 1985). Although most people rarely cross physical borders in their lifetime, the ease of border traversals online would

suggest that most internet users are constantly crossing digital borders. There are several ways online spaces such as websites or other internet resources might signal their national affiliation. One such way is through the use of “country-code top-level domain names” (ccTLDs) that are in fact managed by an organization affiliated with the country in question that is the “designated manager” of second-level domain names (DNS) with the defined ccTLD (Postel 1994). The presence of a ccTLD often does not imply that the server that houses the page is in fact physically located on the territory of the country that the ccTLD denotes. However, symbolically, the webpage or an internet resource would display its national affiliation regardless of its actual physical location. We argue that the majority of internet users do not know and likely do not care where the resources they use online are physically located, but pay attention to the symbolic information embedded in the URLs as well as in the content they consume. In fact, prior research demonstrates that barring the physical locations of online resources, a direct analysis of links between sites based exclusively on their URLs indicated that most sites tend to link within a given ccTLD rather than across ccTLDs (Halavais 2000).

The question we ask in this paper is whether symbolic markings of state territory online through the use of ccTLDs might perform similar functions for expressions of statehood and nationalism as their more traditional manifestations. This question is especially relevant when considering people who might live in locations where notions of statehood, nationalism and identity are contested and are in the process of being renegotiated. The countries of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) such as Russia and Kazakhstan make a good example of such locations. Just two decades ago people living in Russia and Kazakhstan had a shared notion of statehood, but with the fall of the Soviet Union these conceptualizations precipitously changed from an overarching civic notion of Soviet personhood to ethnic considerations of belonging (Kharkhordin 2005). These countries are digitally nascent (Wei & Kolko 2005) and the majority of the population still shares a high level of competency in Russian as a common language. As the most digitally advanced country in the FSU, Russia dominates the Russian-language internet that grew exponentially over the course of the last decade. However, Kazakhstan is quickly developing its own internet infrastructure and resources in both Kazakh and Russian languages.

The focus on nationalism may seem reductive in view of a flurry of research focusing on the democratizing potential of the internet, especially in non-Western countries. The very ease of border crossings could and in some cases does encourage free flows of information instrumental in democratic processes through subverting some hierarchies and improving access (Caldas et al 2008). These processes are likely to be important especially 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 fostered by the availability of alternative information and communication methods (MacKinnon 2008). We do not deny that considering

the democratizing potential of the internet in Kazakhstan is important. However, our findings suggest that how these processes function may be better understood if we consider the importance of state symbolism delineating locations and borders on the internet for many of its users.

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 the positive rhetoric, many scholars have repeatedly pointed out that the development and the resulting architecture of the internet was and is still heavily influenced by the western world in general and the US specifically (Wei & 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 about how their own citizens navigate the internet (Kogut 2003). They also bring with them their own ideas of how to manifest their borders on the internet (MacKinnon 2008; Yang 2006).

Although ccTLDs are the most common marker of national affiliation, they are rarely used in the US, suggesting a largely US-centric structure of generic TLD use such as .com, .net or .org (Leiner et al 2002). The lack of a country-identification for US businesses and personal sites may have been one of the drivers for the idea that the internet can be a borderless space. The use of ccTLDs is far more common in countries other than the US. 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-US 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 a group of people that 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. 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 in the nineteenth century. Imagined communities speaks of nationalism as a particular symbolic exercise supported by media. This theoretical outlook carries much conceptual weight for studying expressions of nationalism online, but nationalism as a concept cannot be understood without proper attention to the state and nation.

In Max Weber’s well traveled 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 leads to establishing borders through political and military means. A functioning state, at a minimum, must be able to maintain a monopoly of force within their borders. As borders demarcate the territorial limits of a state, political communities must have those on the outside to draw a distinction to those included. Both states and nationalisms are largely defined by their limits and nationalism views it is a necessary political project that the limits of both are the same (Gellner 2006). The nation results from the completion of this project.

As part of this process borders mark physical limits, but they also increase in symbolic importance. Territorial borders are one of the most readily visible manifestations of the state as they are often marked by fences, guards, and no-man’s lands in between. The crossing of territorial borders then becomes a strong reminder and reinforcer of group membership. Firm territorial markers of the nation do not exist on the internet, but expressions of nationalism are certainly present in the form of particular language use and the use of ccTLDs. For example, Wei and Kolko (2005) clearly 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. Such manifestations of nationalism create an opportunity for the disambiguation of nationalism from the boundaries of the state and its reliance on the creation of symbolic space on the internet. Beyond the employment of nationalist rhetoric, symbolic territory is forged through content and the ccTLD often serves as an identifier.

The creation of nations in the Soviet Union is a clear example of the connection between state, nation, and nationalism, though with a stronger top-down influence than allowed by Anderson. “‘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 and each group was 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 became the clearest identifier of these units (Schlyter 2003). The Soviet Union supported and codified ethnic nationalism through policies that rested on these conceptualizations of difference. After the fall of Soviet communism, the ethnic nationalisms institutionalized by state flourished in the space left by its collapse (Slezkine 1994). In Kazakhstan these larger political changes

occurred in the context of a continuity of national leadership that was strongly ethnically Kazakh (Dave 2007).

The broader 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 changes, which in turn led to speculation that states around the world are 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).

Language and Internet use in Kazakhstan

Use of the Kazakh language is a particularly sensitive issue in Kazakhstan, 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. 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). In the early 1920s, at the time of formation of the Soviet Union, the Russian language was used as a symbol of Soviet unity. At the time and for the subsequent 70 years, the Russian language functioned as a unifying factor and a symbol of both Soviet culture and Soviet people, motivating its elevation in importance in Kazakhstan and other republics despite its lack of status as the national language. Russian soon became the favoured 'career language' for the education of most youth during the Soviet times (Schlyter 2003). The varieties of ethnic particularism that consolidated in the Soviet union and most strongly in the Soviet republics remained in a subordinate position in both the language and practice of internationalism within the union. In the language of Soviet internationalism the "Great Russians" remained normative, 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 continues to dominate in Kazakhstan for several reasons. Ethnic Kazakhs constitute only 50% of the population and the non-Kazakh population had few motivating reasons to learn Kazakh during the 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 higher proficiency in Russian than Kazakh (Dave 2007; Nysanbaeva 2003). The question of language thus remains a highly politicized and sensitive issue in Kazakhstan especially in relation to discussions of nationalism and statehood.

We expected to see language based enclaves on the internet mirroring country-based domain spaces as an outgrowth of the ethnic and linguistic nationalism that flourished and shaped the trajectory of countries after the fall of the Soviet Union. The fact that the Russian-language internet is older

and more established limited this effect. Russia has been ahead of the other FSU countries in its development and adoption of the internet, and the resources that it had to promote internet development and use meant that a large number of successful russian-language internet resources were developed by the time most other FSU countries had even named a portion of the internet as their own (Wei & Kolko 2005). Thus the populations of many FSU countries, including Kazakhstan, having no language boundary with Russia and having very few locally-based resources, gravitated toward Russian sites. This created an environment that left local businesses directly competing with Russian sites and in some cases they competed through language and in others they created their own resources in Russian to offer alternatives to users who had become used to russian-language resources at that point. Russia's highly developed internet infrastructure, better developed sights, and vastly larger human and economic resources vis-à-vis Kazakhstan furthered this long standing relationship. The cultural, social, and economic power of Russia continues to over shadow its neighbor as these migrated to the Internet.

Technical note on ccTLDs

Before we move on to discuss our study and findings, it is important to note a bit of 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 the specific policies under which it administers ccTLDs. According to the official Kazakhstan registration rules, a site with that has a second level domain within the .kz address space does not have to be hosted on the territory of Kazakhstan. However, the government of Kazakhstan retains the right to revoke the use of any .kz domain at any time (NiC KZ 2005).

Methodology

The research presented here is part of an ongoing qualitative research project that investigates how people in Kazakhstan use the internet and other communication technologies for communication and information seeking purposes and how these technologies are being integrated into everyday practices. The first author conducted 38 semi-structured interviews, two focus groups as well as many hours of informal conversations and observations in three different cities in Kazakhstan in the spring of 2009 and again in the spring of 2010. The interview participants were recruited using snowball sampling initially seeded through personal contacts or encounters in internet café's 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 the potential trajectories of further development and future use. The majority of conversations centered on communication and information seeking practices as well as any contributions in the form of blogging or posts on discussion forum spaces. The

semistructured interviews were conducted by the first author and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each, usually in a location of the interviews choosing.

Participants

Our sample of 49 included 38 individual interviews and two focus groups. Eight of the interviews were conducted with IT professionals who were directly involved in the development of Kazakh internet resources. Three interviews were conducted with prominent local bloggers. The rest of the interviews and focus groups were conducted with people of varying socio-economic status and backgrounds and focused on their patterns of every day use. The sample included 25 men and 24 women, aged 18 to 62 (average 35). All but two of were native to Kazakhstan. The two Russians that had relocated to Kazakhstan, did so prior to the dissolution of Soviet Union. Of the interviewees, all were fluent in Russian, 38% were fluent in Kazakh and 40% spoke at least some English. Six of the interviewees spoke both Kazakh and English. All interviews and focus groups were conducted in Russian.

Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Following the methods of qualitative data analysis suggested by Emerson and colleagues (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 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 a look at the bigger picture. Evidence of acute awareness of 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 language they used for their contributions and online participation. All representative quotes presented here are reproduced as spoken, with the respondent's residence at the time of the interview indicated. Names were changed to preserve confidentiality.

Findings

The many internets

Although much rhetoric in western countries still speaks of the one single internet that spans the world, the experience of talking about the

internet in Kazakhstan begins to question this notion of a global undifferentiated online space. Consider the following exchange in the course of an informal conversation in Almaty that the first author subsequently noted in her fieldnotes:

“

- *Well Nur.kz I think is based on similar portals they have in by-net and I guess they are really popular there.*
- *What is ‘by-net’?*
- *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*” that clearly denotes a separate space and a notion of ownership of that space by someone other than the respondent. 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)

The second point that is important to note, is that *by-net* is where one might find Belorussians presumably because that’s 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 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. Being neighbors, both individuals as well as mass media outlets often mentioned *uz-net* when referring to the Uzbek internet space and *kir-net* or *keg-net* when talking of Kyrgyzstan. Yet people in Kazakhstan also routinely accessed *ru-net* – the much 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 mirrors the continuing dominance of 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 the electronic government and promotion and development of resources and content in *kaz-net* through provision of support to internet-based businesses (*from fieldnotes*). 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 meant that the government of Kazakhstan would take an even more active role in 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 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 me:

“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 ‘cause in kaz-net you just torrent, there isn’t much there except for like this one forum everyone uses.” (ZN, Almaty)

Many people directly involved in content development and internet-based commerce suggested the already existing and popular Russian internet make it difficult to compete, slowing down the development of the local internet space. As one entrepreneur suggested:

“Kaz-net is developing, but we are young and Russians, they have a lot more resources so it is very hard to compete” (SI, Aktau)

The issues raised here did not simply concern business opportunities and competition in various aspects internet commerce although those were certainly present. Rather we would like to point out the distinctly nationalist aspects of this discussion. It was not simply that there were other resources already available, but that these resources came from Russia – a country that frequently inspired anti-colonial sentiment given Kazakhstan’s recent history. The expressed need for *kaz-net* to be somehow less empty, full of competitive resources and unique content came also from a need to feel some form of national pride of the country’s achievements demonstrated online to the world in general and at times to Russia specifically.

Us vs. 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, just as easily available, but whose origins were not Kazakh. 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 responded as follows to the question *“what are some of the sites that you make sure to visit often?”* *“Well I don’t read too many of **our own** bloggers, but **our** oppositional news-rags are worth checking out online.”* (MS, Almaty)

When describing which sites they used for communicating with friends, a 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...*

- *Well yeah, **we** don't have anything like *odnoklassniki.ru*, but everyone's on there, but it's Russian.” (FG1, Aktau)*

In every interview, respondents indicated they were aware that Russian-language internet resources that originated 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 extremely 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 respondents' notion of their national community focused on people, belonging, and ethnicity, rather than on state institutions and politics. This points to the complex overlay of ideas of nationalism with the function of the state. It also points to the fact that people were making decisions out of consideration to their own perceived membership in an imagined community, which in turn gave this community its vitality.

Language and expressions of ethnicity

When speaking of available internet resources and the persistent dominance of sites originating from Russia, many Kazakh speaking 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, many commented on the importance of both Russian and English for simply navigating online. For many young Kazakh-speaking respondents, however, use of Kazakh was an important marker of ethnic identity and a delimitation of national space online. Initially, 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 for free.

The major impetus of this work was to create an available space for young Kazakh internet users where they could create content in Kazakh. Translation efforts declined recently as local Kazakh resources such as video hosting services (*kiwi.kz*) and blog platforms (*yvision.kz*) came into existence already supporting Kazakh alphabet and providing Kazakh language

interfaces. The choice of western rather than Russian resources for translation stemmed from a perception that Russian resources would be resistant to these kinds of offers. Besides, Russian resources were expected to translate a lot of functionality into Kazakh themselves if they were to demonstrate they were serious about Kazakhstan as a viable market. Ensuring the visibility not only of Kazakhstan in general, but of Kazakh language specifically 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. That afternoon a local media activist gave a short presentation on the opportunities provided by new media and then lead the subsequent discussion in Kazakh. 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.

“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)

During a Central Asia BarCamp 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 blog URLs with font so small it was barely readable. Nevertheless, 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 that having a .kz URL extension was an important consideration.

These examples raise the issue of what might or might not have been perceived as legitimately part of *kaz-net*. In the example above, the audience members clearly disagreed whether content produced in Kazakh was enough or whether the .kz extension was necessary 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 the overall agreement that it was imperative to support Kazakh-language online, carefully nurturing nascent blogging and content production attempts, for many participants it was nevertheless seen as important to do so within the .kz domain.

ccTLDs as statements of affinity, belonging and opposition

In the course of many interviews, participants brought up 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, ‘cause they are doing this themselves and trying to be international, not just Russian”

The .org extension in this case is seen as a marker of internationalism that is not ethnically or nationally affiliated with a particular place despite the fact 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 was important to maintain continuity and presence in *kaz-net*, others spoke of having a .kz extension as a matter of pride. As one of the owners of the online business 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 locating online came from bloggers and journalists who participated in oppositional discussion and news sites or produced political commentary. While quite a few of the bloggers had personal blogs on LiveJournal, seen in Kazakhstan as a Russian space of intellectual elite, many others also maintained sites on Kazakh blog platforms or contributed articles to group discussion sites¹. LiveJournal and many other western blog platforms are blocked in Kazakhstan, 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. The generic TLD’s of choice in these cases seem to be .net or, more often, .info. However, the majority of these sites retained ‘kz’ at least somewhere in their URL as a way to continue signalling national affiliation, despite hosting their sites on servers in Russia, Latvia or even the US and using generic TLDs.

Selecting where to host a site, sure to be blocked for the kind of content it intended to produce and the kinds of issues it intended to discuss was nevertheless a complex process. As one blogger and active contributor to

¹ In the course of field work, many conversations with political bloggers and activists were informal. However, even formal interviews were not recorded at the request of the participants.

several oppositional discussion and news spaces explained, suggesting that internet-enabled democratic possibilities of free discussion were still informed by national boundary considerations:

“So you can’t have .kz ‘cause they will just pull it or just never approve it, so like you don’t want to do .ru obviously and .com is the most expensive but it’s also commercial and American so like .info is good. ‘Cause we are really providing information that’s important to people here, or at least should be important, you know... raising public consciousness and stuff.” (DN, Almaty)

Taken together these findings suggest that residents of Kazakhstan were acutely aware of national boundary traversals as they navigated the internet. These traversals are, of course, made obvious through particular infrastructural issues, where internal domains are much faster and more reliably accessible than external domains. However, the complex calculus of domain selection for 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, 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. 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 symbolic borders. 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/sites on the internet. The attribution of affiliation and membership to particular sites has nothing to do with the reality of a sites 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 grew out of the notions of ethnic nationalism fostered by the policies of the Soviet state. This is not so much “resistance to Globalization” that Wei and Kolko (2005) talk about, but a particular historically and socially situated process that necessarily happens because small countries need to delineate space that they can claim as “theirs”

on the internet as well as everywhere else, in order to confirm the continuity of their identities.

Resources from Russia that clearly dominate any Russian-speaking internet space are seen by users in Kazakhstan as the most convenient and at the same time as the worst kind of competition. Given the country's extended and complex relationship with Russia a collective opposition to Russian domination serves to evoke nationalism in users decisions online. This is especially true among young ethnic Kazakhs who are seeking ways to make stronger expressions of their ethnic identity and to further a language that is clearly faltering in an internet space dominated by Russian. This may account for the young ethnic Kazakh's privileging western resources, especially those that offer ways of easily adding functionality in a new language, like Wordpress and Facebook. However, many Kazakhstan citizens, not just the ethnic Kazakhs, identify with their country and often feel like under-dogs from a small country with few resources that is just coming online. This may account for the acutely visible expressions of affinities and national pride in these conversations.

Users in Kazakhstan view *kaz-net* as a manifestation of the nation to which they feel they belong and in which they are invested. Despite the diverging interests of the users—from dissident bloggers to businesses—nationalism broadly, their sense of belonging to a nation struggling to define itself, and anti-colonial sentiment toward Russia results in some similar ways different users talk about *kaz-net*, similar ways they perceive placenss on the internet, and its national/community borders on the internet. The state plays a vital role in enforcing limits, blocking sights, and in its attempts at particular forms of control. But regardless of these state level efforts, the imagined community of people who feel they belong to Kazakhstan harbors a desire to feel ownership of some pieces of the internet. The domain extension .kz, two letters that provide a spatial marking on the internet, function as a focal point for the creation of the imagined community of the nation in the digital world. In the end, ccTLDs function as symbolic markers and this symbolism increases in importance in locations where notions of nationalism and statehood are in flux.

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