# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................. 1

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 2
   Purpose of the Study
   Structure of Study

II. CONTEXT OF KYRGYZSTAN AND WIDER CENTRAL ASIA .............. 4

III. METHODS ................................................................. 10
   Research Design
   Research Questions

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS .................................................. 11
   Descriptive Analysis
   Research Questions

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS ........................................ 14
   Research Limitations
   Future Research
   Conclusion
ABOUT THIS REPORT

This white paper draws on survey research conducted with a financial grant from the Internet Policy Observatory at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania on self-censorship practices of Kyrgyz citizens. The academic paper, authored by Bahtiyar Kurambayev, Laura Schwartz-Henderson, and Ken Winneg, is currently under review for publication. This report seeks to provide a historical account of Kyrgyzstan’s political and media systems, an overview of the findings of the study as they relate to contemporary practices of silence and expression online and offline, and offer analysis of these findings and recommendations to the policy and advocacy communities working on issues related to democratization and freedom of expression in the Central Asian region. For more information on this research, please email b.kurambayev@kimep.kz

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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ABOUT THE INTERNET POLICY OBSERVATORY

The Internet Policy Observatory (IPO) is a project at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. The overarching goal of the program is to deepen the reservoir of researchers and advocates in regions where Internet freedom is threatened or curtailed and to support the production of innovative, high-quality, and impactful internet policy research. The IPO facilitates collaboration between research and advocacy communities, builds research mentorships between emerging and established scholars, and engages in trainings to build capacity for more impactful digital rights research and advocacy.

Through the IPO’s three-pronged approach, the program seeks to educate a network of advocates and researchers, produce high-impact, locally-relevant research in furtherance of Internet freedom objectives, and help connect researchers and mentors to foster collaboration, mobilization, and increase research impact.

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T
he expression of opinion on public matters without fear of punishment is essential not only for civic and political engagement but also for wider democracy,¹ as public deliberation within a population contributes to a well-informed and engaged citizenry². According to this logic, political knowledge, opinions and information must circulate freely and allow for participation by all in order for citizens to make informed political choices³. Over the past decade, with increased access to the internet in many parts of the world, social media and online platforms have inspired new hope for people living in repressive and authoritarian countries, serving as outlets for free debate, circulation of information, expression of opinions, and for organizing dissent and protest. However, within that time many governments around the world have quickly adapted new strategies to control these online spaces in order to limit the potential for the circulation of political information and opinions contrary to state interests⁴. Beyond using legislative and policy mechanisms to remove or filter specific content on these platforms, governments have also developed sophisticated strategies to both spread government sponsored messages and intimidate those who express political opinions. These governments are also using social media platforms to identify users and “limit online activism by intimidating and jailing (or worse) those who use online platforms for dissent and opposition”⁵. The government’s arsenal for information control online thus includes explicit censorship of content through policy and law, the circulation of biased information, as well as the incitement of fear related to the act of expression. While there are many studies on how authoritarian governments use the first and second strategies to suppress expression and deliberation, the implications of this last approach have been studied far less. Intimidation and fear related to expression, and specifically related to the expression of political opinions, both affects and is affected by the specific political and social cultures of a country⁶. The psychological effects of real or perceived threats on expression are long-lasting, culturally embedded, and erode the democratizing potential of public deliberation⁷. The cultures and practices of self-censorship generated by this fear are also notoriously difficult to study.

This white paper focuses on this challenge, seeking to better understand why citizens in authoritarian contexts choose to self-censor or withhold an opinion from others for fear of potential negative consequences. It builds on the findings from academic research (currently under review for publication) and seeks to contribute to the small body of research related to self-censorship in Central Asia. This paper focused specifically on the country of Kyrgyzstan as a case study of self-censorship practices. More discussion is offered in the following section to describe Kyrgyzstan’s historical and political context and our rationales for choosing this country for this research. However, it is important to note here that Kyrgyzstan is an interesting case study due to its history of authoritarian control and recent peoples’ revolutions, the higher rate of internet penetration in the country as compared to its neighbors in the region, the frequency of protests both online and offline, and the increasing actions on the part of the government to repress freedom of expression and consolidate political control. The focus of this study – examining under what circumstances Kyrgyz social media users tend to speak out themselves and when they are reluctant to do so is particularly salient in a country like Kyrgyzstan where citizens have little political choice, enduring historical memories of surveillance and control, and newfound access to and use of the internet for both political and non-political purposes.

This white paper has been organized into four parts. The first section provides a background on Kyrgyzstan and wider Central Asia, providing a short overview on how self-censorship plays a role in such a regional context. The second section describes the research methods used for this study and outlines the guiding research questions. The third section outlines some of the findings, integrating them into the existing literature on self-censorship in Kyrgyzstan. The final section offers a discussion of the findings along with some practical recommendations for a variety of stakeholders engaged in policy, advocacy, and research on freedom of expression and democratization both in Central Asia and worldwide.
For about 70 years, Kyrgyzstan was one of the 12 countries that comprised the Soviet Union, gaining its independence in 1991. Kyrgyzstan, also known as the Kyrgyz Republic, remains one of the poorest countries in the region with a population of about six million. It borders Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and China, and the official languages are both Russian and Kyrgyz. Upon gaining independence, Kyrgyzstan gained a reputation as an “island of democracy” surrounded by more authoritarian nations, because the country’s constitution was changed to meet international standards to provide civil and political rights for its citizens. Since that time, the constitution has been changed seven times, with the current version, adopted in 2010, continuing to offer relatively robust formal protection for freedom of speech and of expression.

Despite these codified protections, since its independence, the country has experienced constant political instability, weak rule of law, widespread corruption, organized crime, ethnic divisions, internal and external extremism, and low economic growth and opportunity. According to the 2017 Fragile States Index, Kyrgyzstan is listed as a high warning country, with potential for political and economic failure. Unlike neighboring Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan lacks oil, gas, or any other major natural resource, to support its economy and it thus relies heavily on various international grants and loans. In April of 2016, Parliament members drafted a law to formally acknowledge this economic insecurity and the country’s urgent need for continued humanitarian aid. Poverty, unemployment, and low wages are among the many compelling reasons why almost a million Kyrgyz citizens work abroad, with most migrating to Russia and sending money back home to relatives. Statistical data vary depending on source of, but it is thought that up to 17% of the Kyrgyz people are migrant workers in foreign countries. 75% of those Kyrgyz migrants are under the age of 35. As a result, Kyrgyzstan has been called a “country of departure.”

These same socio-economic factors, as well as other political forces within the country, negatively affect the political climate and hinder Kyrgyz citizens from exercising their constitutional rights. Judicial independence is variable, with many credible reports alleging that judges pay bribes to attain their positions. According to a Freedom House report, the judicial system continues to serve the interests of political elites and to selectively prosecute government critics or outspoken community leaders. Political elites exploit government resources to retain power and pursue private interests rather than public interests. Political capture and corruption have also led to continued political instability. The country’s first two presidents after independence were overthrown by popular uprisings in 2005 and 2010, and both presidents fled the country to seek asylum in foreign countries. The first post-independence president,  

Askar Akayev, monopolized power, enriched his family, and suppressed opposition. Due to growing pessimism about his governance, as well as widespread corruption and poverty in the country, an estimated 20,000 protestors assembled in the central square of the capital city of Bishkek on March 24, 2005 to demand his resignation. After a series of large-scale demonstrations and protests in the country followed, Akayev fled the country that year. The second president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, came to power in 2005 and was re-elected in 2010. However, he was also forced to flee closely after his re-election in 2010 due to popular uprisings against the deteriorating socio-economic situation.

Since that time, the political environment has continued to deteriorate as the government increasingly has sought to stifle political dissent in order to maintain the current regime’s power. Kyrgyz authorities are accused of selectively using the law when dealing with members of the political opposition and critics. In 2017, Kyrgyzstan officials arrested key politicians, including the prominent Omurbek Tekebayev. Tekebayev was sentenced to eight years in prison and his property confiscated on charges of corruption. At the time of his arrest, there were at least nine other politicians and former officials awaiting sentencing for alleged crimes. For example, Kyrgyzstan’s prosecutors opened a criminal probe into former General Prosecutor Aida Salyanova, former justice minister Almanbet Shykmamatov, and others ahead of the October 2017 presidential election. Omurbek Babanov, one of the main rivals of then-President candidate Sooronbay Jeyenbekov (who is currently serving as President), announced in December of 2017 that he was quitting politics and subsequently fled the country. The arrests surrounding the presidential election sparked numerous protests in the country and sent a shockwave of warning to other critics. In this context, Kyrgyzstan was listed as a “consolidated authoritarian regime” by the Nations In Transit report for the first time since 2011, due to this growing suppression of civil society and repeals of political freedoms.

Kyrgyzstan has a relatively saturated media environment for such a geographically small country. There are more than 1500 registered news outlets in the country including daily and weekly newspapers, magazines, radio and TV stations, and websites. Seven news agencies function in the country. The media system in Kyrgyzstan is considered to be more robust than many of its neighbors. In the 2017 IREX Media Sustainability Index (MSI), Kyrgyzstan is ranked in the “near sustainability” category while neighboring countries such as Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan are either classified as “unsustainable mixed systems” or “unsustainable anti-free press systems”. Despite being ranked higher than neighboring countries in the region, Kyrgyzstan’s media environment and overall freedom of the press and freedom of speech remain constrained. Seventy percent of all active media outlets in the country belong either to political parties or their affiliates.

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT & FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IN KYRGYZSTAN

17. Zozulya, M. (March 2, 2017). Questions Over Arrest of Kyrgyz Opposition Figure. Available at https://iwpr.net/global-voices/questions-over-arrest-kyrgyz-opposition-figure
Additionally, while international news outlets, such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, BBC, Agence-France Press (AFP), the Institute on War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), are allowed to operate in the country, they are forced to avoid overly critical and controversial topics. This is largely due to the country’s defamation laws, the frequent lawsuits brought against journalists, and the “disproportionate” and “excessive” fines imposed for defamation. It is also not uncommon for Kyrgyz journalists to be threatened by physical attack, with countless attacks on journalists and death threats documented in the country throughout the past decade. In their 2016 report, the International Research and Exchange Board describes how Kyrgyz journalists are afraid to report on high-ranking politicians. According to McGlinchey and Johnson, the overall media environment in the country remains one of the most oppressive in the world, with independent journalists being continually harassed, threatened, violently attacked, prosecuted, and imprisoned. In this “fearful environment,” journalists self-censor and as a result tend to focus their stories on celebrities, culture, sports, and anything else that would avoid personal trouble for their careers.

The International Journal of Press/Politics, 13(4), 515-525.


33. Kaktus Media. (June 13, 2017). Министро образования: До конца года планируется провести интернет в 765 школ (765 schools will be connected to the Internet by the end of the year). Retrieved from https://kaktus.media/doc/358814_ministr_obrazovaniia_do_konca_goda_planiyetsia_provesti_internet_v_765_shkol.html


Overall, if third of Kyrgyz population has access to the internet. Kyrgyzstan’s Education Ministry is attempting to bring internet access to all educational institutions, and the number of internet users in the country is growing. The average cost for internet access in major cities can be around US$10-15 per month (almost 10% of the average monthly income), while in rural areas costs may even be higher. This growth of internet access in the country has had political effects and spurred democratic actions. Specifically, the internet played an instrumental role in the first people’s revolution in 2005 that ousted then President Askar Akayev. Social media sites were extensively used again in the second people’s revolution in 2010 that eventually ousted then-President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. In addition, there have been several cases at the local and national level of internet users effectively forming communities online to influence government decisions. For example, in 2015, social media users criticized the Kyrgyz parliament for buying luxurious new chairs with a price of $300 a piece, growing to become a wider campaign against government corruption. In 2016, citizens used online platforms to avoid personal trouble for their careers.
to organize and demonstrate against a law passed by the Kyrgyz parliament to require foreign nationals to register with local authorities. Shortly after this massive outcry by internet users, then-Prime Minister Sooronbai Jeenbekov reversed the decree, according to Diplomat, an analytical online news magazine that covers Central Asia and other parts of Asia.

Given the growing power of the internet and fear of the potential political consequences of increased political debate on social media platforms, the Kyrgyz government has strengthened its efforts to both monitor how social media users “behave” online and suppress online criticism. In January of 2018, lawmakers began parliamentary sessions by initiating discussions on potential new restrictions to social media access. Aibek Isaev, one government official, lamented that social media is only used to make fun of officials. Parliament member Irina Karamushkina, urged Parliament to pursue internet users who criticize President Almazbek Atambayev. The country’s libel laws have been extended to cover online communications, with punishments for defamation including exorbitant fees as well as jail time. In February of 2018, a local university faculty member faced criminal charges for his comments online. In 2017, courts have ordered media outlets, journalists, and human rights defenders to pay a total of $430,000 US dollars to Kyrgyzstan’s now-former president for defamation. Within this crackdown, the Kyrgyz government is not only targeting locals but also foreigners who are critical of the government. In 2017, human rights activists and journalists were repeatedly denied entry into the country.

While officials use policy, rhetoric, and defamation laws to punish speech on social media, the government is also simultaneously able to monitor these spaces to identify potentially problematic critics. The country’s intelligence services report that they use Facebook and other social media platforms to identify outspoken critics of the government and the president. According to the citizen journalism website Kloop.kg, the Kyrgyz government operates a trolling unit, setup as part of the presidential administration, in which hired trolls are instructed to spread “the right” opinions about a variety of political issues. In a related series of development, in February of 2017, Kyrgyz law enforcement officials organized discussions about the potential “danger” of social media and “negative” consequences of social media use in all schools in the capital city of Bishkek.

Spiral of Silence, Power Distance, Perceived Audiences

In this politically insecure and controlled political environment, citizens may be reluctant to speak out against the government in order to avoid intimidation, harassment and other types of serious trouble. Self-censorship is generally defined by the choice (conscious or unconscious) to not express oneself due to the fear of potential or real consequences. One theory related to self-censorship in these authoritarian contexts is the “spiral of silence”, first described by scholar Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann in 1974. This theory seeks to explain why people in specific contexts may choose to withhold their opinions and other times share their opinions readily. According to Noelle-Neumann, people tend to keep silent to avoid isolation if they believe their opinions are in the minority. However, if people believe their ideas are supported by those surrounding them, then they are more likely to express themselves. According to this theory, people “constantly scan their environment in order to assess the climate of opinion, i.e. the aggregate distribution of opinions on a given issue” and in this context, “[for an] individual, not isolating himself is more important than his own judgment”. This spiral of silence theory has sparked many comparative studies around the world to test its applicability in different cultural, political and socio-economic contexts. Scholars have also examined these theories and self-censorship practices specifically within social media and online spaces in a variety of democratic and non-democratic contexts. These studies include examination of self-censorship via Twitter, Facebook, and Chinese blogging platforms.

Studies on self-censorship offline and online have explored the extent of people’s willingness to express themselves to various types of publics, the types of sanctions individuals expect from their social environment, and particular self-censorship practices of marginalized communities such as women in Kuwait or in Kazakhstan. In addition to the spiral of silence theory, other scholars have analyzed additional cultural factors that contribute to self-censorship behavior. One such explanatory factor for self-censorship is what Peter Anderson refers to as power distance, the degree to which power, prestige and wealth are unequally distributed in a culture. In cultures with an emphasis on power distance, people are generally brought up to accept that unequal distribution of power or influence is inherent to their society. In essence, people in such countries are less likely to attempt to challenge authorities even when they disagree with policies and/or with practices. In Kyrgyzstan, it is common to hear such words as “sabirli” (patience/endurance) in everyday life to describe a non-confrontational approach to addressing one’s problems.

Other scholars have theorized that willingness to speak is also contingent on the potential speaker’s perceptions of his or her audience. Social media users might speak out if they perceive their audience members to be close friends, but self-censor if their audience members are parents or supervisors. Thus, the composition of audience members is an important factor that requires further analysis.

There has also been a great deal of research and speculation examining the influencing factors related to self-censoring behavior in online spaces. Some scholars argue that people are less willing to share their true opinions in an online context because their online history can be retrieved at a later time and monitored. Conversely, other scholars have argued that people are more likely to express their opinions in online spaces due to perceived anonymity.

It is important to note that research exploring self-censorship is particularly challenging, as it is difficult to operationalize, measure, and obtain reliable information about self-censorship practices given that they inherently involve a decision (both conscious and sub-conscious) not to act (to speak, write, publish). These measurement difficulties are especially true for survey-based research in politically sensitive contexts where people may even self-censor their opinions and self-reported behaviors about self-censorship. Indeed, scholars Eric Freedman and Richard Shafer, have argued that within controlled political environments such as Kyrgyzstan, scholars who conduct survey, interview and focus group research may find prospective respondents unwilling to participate or provide candid opinions due to the general culture of silence and fear of government retaliation. However, the current study has attempted to overcome these challenges in several ways. Firstly, we offered full anonymity by not asking for any identifiable information from survey participants, who were free to stop participating throughout the survey, or not participate at all. Secondly, we offered hypothetical and non-controversial topic scenarios without linking to any particular current political actors. Finally, participants were contacted through personal networks of college professors and other trusted sources. We admit that people may still lie and/or exaggerate, and may under- or overestimate estimate self-censoring behavior.

In this context, this work explores the following questions: (1) What do internet users say they like to talk about among friends in face-to-face setting? (2) What do internet users like to talk about among friends in a computer-mediated setting? (3) What are some of the reasons why Kyrgyzstani may self-censor? (4) How does the composition of a perceived audience affect people’s intention to express themselves? (5) What are some of the potential expected sanctions for expressing a minority opinion?


Data for this study is based on a 24-question survey developed and conducted between October 10 and November 10, 2017. This survey was deployed before, during, and after the presidential election, held on October 15, 2017, and included specific questions mentioning hypothetical presidential candidates. The survey was distributed online to students enrolled in Universities in Kyrgyzstan using the Qualtrics survey platform, with respondents participating on their own computers. The study used a combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods. No one under 18 was invited to participate in this study. Participation was voluntary and respondents were offered the option to stop at any time or complete the survey partially. The survey was offered in Russian, the official language of Kyrgyzstan.

The college-age demographic was chosen partially due to convenience purposes. Additionally, according to previous research in countries around the world, this age group and education level (younger voting-aged citizens with higher than average educational levels) are more likely to speak out and feel comfortable using online platforms. While this demographic may not be representative of the self-censoring behaviors of all Kyrgyz citizens, this group represents an important public with a considerable online presence.

Approximately 67 percent of the respondents were female ($n = 246$) and 33 percent were male ($n = 119$). Female overrepresentation in this study reflects the predominantly female population in universities across Kyrgyz Republic. Second-year students made up the largest group at 31.5 percent, followed by first-year students at 24.4 percent, and third-year students at 17.5 percent, graduate level students at 14.8 percent, fourth-year students at 10.1 percent and finally fifth-year students at 1.6 percent.

For information about the questions used to measure variables such as relationships to perceived audience, fear of isolation, social media use frequency, willingness to self-censor, and power distance, please email the authors (contact information available at the beginning of this white paper) for data-related to the full paper, currently submitted for publication.
Almost half (42 percent) of the survey participants reported that Instagram was their primary social media platform, closely followed by Facebook (30 percent), VKontakte (13.2 percent) and Odnoklasniki (12.3 percent). Moi Mir and Twitter were the least popular social media platforms among the study sample (0.8 percent) each.

Approximately 65 percent of all participants reported that they have been using social media for more than three years; twenty-five percent reported that they have been using social media for between one and three years; roughly six percent have been using social media less than six months; and the remaining four percent report being active social media users for between six months and one year.

For this study, we sought to better understand what kind of content respondents feel comfortable discussing, and also if there is a difference between their self-censorship practices online and offline. In an offline context, “work/study” (28.8 percent) is the most frequent topic internet users are willing to discuss, “relationships” were the second most frequently talked theme among the sample (19 percent), followed by “sports” (15.3 percent) and “news” (14.5 percent) “politics/government” (5.2 percent) and “social problems” (4.1 percent). Online discussion subject preferences mirrored these offline trends with “work/study” as the most frequent topic internet users discuss online (27.9 percent), followed by “relationships” (21.9 percent), “news” ranked the third top subject for discussion (15.1 percent), and...
sports (12.6 percent). Entertainment was popular among 7.7 percent of sample participants. Politics/government and social problems were equally the least popular topics (3.8 percent each).

Beyond general content categories, respondents were asked about their willingness to speak within several hypothetical situations in which they disagreed with the majority. More than 55 percent of all respondents said that they would not participate in an online discussion about a presidential candidate’s message when the majority of other online users seem to disagree with their views. However, when asked this same question in an offline context, only 29 percent reported that they would not participate in this conversation. For another question regarding a hypothetical scenario involving the controversial cancelation of a soccer match, again more respondents said they would not participate in the discussion online (almost 53 percent) vs in an offline context (41 percent).

As part of our wider analysis, we also compared responses from questions about respondents’ social media use and their willingness to self-censor. The results of this analysis show that there is a significant relationship between frequency of social media use and willingness to self-censor in an online context. The more active a respondent reported they were on social media (i.e. Posting status updates on their wall; posting on the wall of friends or in groups or on pages; posting comments or likes on posts of friends, in groups, or on pages), the more reluctant they also reported being in expressing their opinions in an online mode. Students who report they are online either “frequently” or “sometimes” were significantly more likely than those who are online less often to say they are willing to self-censor. These relationships did not correlate to willingness to self-censor in an offline space. This suggests that those who are more savvy on social media sites are also warier to present their authentic opinions in these spaces.

Our analysis also sought to explore the relationship between the Fear of Isolation variable, the Power Distance variable, and the Intention to Self-Censor variable. The statistical analysis of the relationships between these variables suggests that fear of isolation had the strongest predictive effect on willingness to self-censor, while power distance was also significant. Given this information, we can say that approximately 39 percent of the variance in someone’s willingness to self-censor can be explained by the differences in fear of isolation and power distance.

This research also sought to understand how audience relevance (or the speaker’s relationship with audience members) affects respondents’ intentions to express themselves. According to the analysis, the vast majority of respondents are comfortable expressing their true opinions with their best friends and family members. That is, slightly more than 85 percent of all respondents indicated that they felt extremely or somewhat comfortable expressing their true opinions with best friends while 77 percent of respondents said they were extremely or somewhat comfortable in expressing their true opinions with family members. The number of those who reported they felt comfortable expressing their opinions to a friend of a friend was almost 37 percent, to those with whom they never met before was 35 percent, and to co-workers was roughly 22 percent. This would suggest that the perceived composition of a social media or offline audience has a substantial effect on the decision to self-censor.

To better understand the reasons why Kyrgyz social media users might self-censor, respondents were asked what sanctions they would expect for expressing their perceived minority opinion both online and offline. Approximately 47 percent said that it would

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63. We ran a simple linear regression to examine the relationship between dependent variable willingness to self-censor and two predictor variables, fear of isolation and power distance.
be very likely that, as a repercussion for expressing a minority opinion, they would be insulted or verbally attacked by others on social media. 20 percent of respondents indicated fear of potential government retaliations. Other fears included experiencing negative repercussions in one’s professional life and future career (almost 19 percent of respondents), being insulted/attacked in real life (almost 20 percent), and developing a bad reputation (approximately 10 percent). In an offline context, 32 percent of respondents indicated a fear of developing a bad reputation. Just over 25 percent of all respondents indicated that they could be excluded or rejected by others, followed by being insulted/attacked (almost 22 percent) and experiencing negative repercussions for their professional life and career future (approximately 22 percent) and their personal life (21 percent).

Overall, more respondents believed there was a greater likelihood of suffering verbal attacks for their comments online rather than for comments offline. Additionally, there was a greater perceived threat of negative repercussions for professional life and future career for comments made online than offline.
Although there is a substantial body of literature about when, with whom, and under what circumstances people tend to self-censor, until now little attention has been paid to exploring these issues in the wider region of non-democratic Central Asia. Central Asia is an important region for researchers to test such theories because the internet is relatively new to the region and has a lower penetration rate compared to other parts of the world. We believe this to be the first such study in the region, and the findings may thus illuminate some important knowledge about people’s self-censoring behavior in this little-researched region, despite acknowledged constraints on the generalizability of the data collected. While exploratory, a major finding of this study is that social media users in Kyrgyzstan are more likely to self-censor online than in offline environments. In fact, respondents who report more frequent social media use (and could be presumed as more sophisticated social media users) are actually more likely to self-censor online than infrequent users, suggesting that knowledge about social media leads one to filter one’s opinions and posts online. Fear of isolation and power distance played significant roles in predicting someone’s intentions to self-censor, with the intention to self-censor also relating to perceptions of audience composition.

Overall, among a variety of topics, politics/government and social problems were the least likely topics for students to discuss with peers both in online context and face-to-face circumstances. This finding contradicts previous beliefs that young people might use social media and wider online platforms for political information. Scholars have argued that if young people are engaged politically, then they continue to be active throughout their lives. If this study’s finding that respondents avoid discussing politics/government issues and social problems is reflective of wider trends for the younger generation in the country, it is an alarming finding for those who have expectations for improved democratic outcomes in Kyrgyzstan. Avoiding talking about politics can lead to a lack of understanding of politics and low participation rates, both of which are important precedents for democracy.

Although not measured in this study, these high rates of willingness to self-censor, especially in social media contexts, could also at least be partially explained by the growth of government surveillance on citizens’ social media engagement as it relates to political and social issues. Therefore, these respondents might be less likely to post about these topics due to this perceived surveillance. If this is the case, efforts by authoritarian-leaning governments such as Kyrgyzstan to limit online activism through publically intimidating and punishing users who use online platforms for dissent and opposition may prove successful. Literature supports the view that government’s online surveillance threatens the disclosure of minority views and contributes to the reinforcement of majority opinions. In addition to the argument by Noelle-Neumann that individuals fear social isolation, these real or perceived beliefs about government surveillance may also contribute to the silencing effect.


These findings are consistent with the current political environment in Kyrgyzstan where repression of opinions is the norm despite the country’s former reputation as an “island of democracy” in the region. What becomes clear from our findings is how extensively this culture of silence affects even highly educated and technologically savvy young people. Additionally, while the internet and social media offer potential opportunities for deliberative debate and contestation, within this pervasive culture of silence these spaces are actually less likely to inspire the exchange of honest opinions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important in a society for people to be able to express themselves without fear of ostracism, physical or verbal attacks or other serious impacts on their personal and professional lives. The findings of this study are alarming as they indicate that Kyrgyz people do not speak freely, especially on political topics, due to fear of a variety of repercussions that are both culturally and politically constructed and reinforced. This is likely to contribute to collective silence both offline and online, leading to growth of this fearful environment and further erosion of democratic norms, free debate, and political freedoms. The findings of this study suggest quite strongly that there is a need for those invested in democratic developments in the Central Asian region and around the world to act on these findings in the following ways:

• International organizations and foundations operating in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia such as Open Society Foundation, United Nations, the United States Agency for International Development (US-AID), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and Internews Network that aim to promote freedom of speech and democratization need to both research and give consideration to how censorship works in these countries- not only from a top-down government policy perspective, but also with a more sophisticated understanding of the cultures of silence and expression. Without a better understanding of the root causes of cultures of censorship, advocacy efforts will not take root.

• Activists and support organizations need to develop culturally appropriate policy and advocacy strategies involving all groups of stakeholders including citizen groups, students, activists, local and international non-government organizations, lawmakers, and others.

These types of strategies should be innovative and address the effects of surveillance, perceived surveillance, cultures of silence, and knowledge about online speech and policy. Example programs could include capacity building projects to further train judicial sector members about the differences between defamation and criticism. Organizations could offer trainings for university students on digital security practices in order to provide them with the confidence to speak up and also understand how they can do so anonymously.

• Silence from within is a problem that is both hard to research and difficult to address, but it is of the utmost importance that more attention is paid to self-censorship amongst research and funder communities. There is a need to support such research in order to better understand the government’s formal and informal online surveillance and their consequences for freedom of speech and freedom of expression.

• Along these lines, it is important to note that the culture of censorship in the country extends to researchers and academics as well. For nearly 70 years during Kyrgyzstan’s existence within the Soviet Union, the Soviet government actively discouraged and impeded independent research. Those who pursued research projects, especially within the social sciences, were forced to censor and manipulate their findings. Academics who dared to undertake independent research risked loss of their jobs, freedom, and even their lives. Presently, the safety of researchers is still a pressing issue in Kyrgyzstan and other countries in the region, with incidents of scholars being detained, interrogated or otherwise scrutinized by security forces. According to the Central Eurasian Studies Society (CESS), “researchers have fallen victim to the risks of fieldwork at the hands of governments and individuals that have felt threatened by scientific study.” Collectively, these continual experiences of repression and perceived and real sanctions for speech have had long-term effects, generating a wider culture of
silence amongst the research community and stifling research production. There is therefore a need for the international community to support researchers and academics working in the country through trainings, funds for continued research on vital political and social topics, and advocacy efforts. Capacity building efforts could take the form of methodological trainings, collaborative ventures between external and internal researchers, and trainings on digital safety and protection against surveillance. Funding support is particularly crucial, as local university professors and researchers earn “starvation” salaries. Governments in the region currently provide little or no support to social science and advocacy-oriented research projects, and therefore external funding is the only support that can further research in the region.

• There is a need for more support from the international community and regional advocacy to push Kyrgyz lawmakers to drop the legislative considerations currently in Kyrgyz Parliament to require social media users that they use their real names and make their contacts visible to all. 71

• While not addressed specifically in this research, another important group affected by self-censorship practices are professional Kyrgyz journalists. In a separate report on journalist’s self-censorship practices in Kyrgyzstan, one journalist expressed her fears related to reporting on controversial political issues, saying, “I am afraid. It is a lot of stress. There are potential lawsuits for money. I am afraid to lose my apartment. There is possibility of physical harm because there are certain people that no one should take their threats as jokes. This is one of the reasons of why I wish to quit journalism… at least serious journalism.” Experiences like these speak to a need for further research, advocacy, and trainings that aim to assist journalists in protecting themselves and producing critical investigative journalism.
