MONGOLIA'S INDEPENDENT INTERNET?

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Introduction

AOIR 2021 conference theme "independence" of the internet provides an opportunity to reevaluate internet development in the global south by applying theories of "informational capitalism" (Castells, 2000; Schiller, 2000) and "surveillance capitalism" (Suboff, 2019) and by bringing in the empirical research of the last 25 years.

In 1996, the first gateway to the internet was established in Mongolia with the support of the "butter fund" of 200,000 American dollars, which sold tons of butter donated by the U.S. Agriculture Department. Then the American Ambassador Donald C. Johnson said: "Mongolia has a way of communicating with the outside world that does not involve relaying information through its two large neighbors, China and Russia" (Corcoran, 1996). The internet, mobile phones and other information and communication technology (ICT) are often seen as modernizing agents inevitably bringing benefits to developing countries.

By employing theories of information society and digital capitalism, I pose the following questions:
- How does informational capitalism interact with the Mongolian nomadic culture and the communist past? and
- What are some benefits and pitfalls of the development of communication technology, the internet, and social media in Mongolia? and
- What legal challenges does the Mongolian legal system face in relation to online speech and privacy-related controversies and how does it address them?

Development of ICT and Major Milestones

This paper traces the history of ICT development in Mongolia, a 30-year-old democracy in the Central Asian steppe. Over the last couple of decades, Mongolia has dramatically increased ICT access for its small population of 3.2 million. The number of users of mobile phones reached 3.8 million, the Internet 2.91 million, and Facebook 2.1 million

respectively in 2020.[1] These technologies created in the United States rapidly spread to the world concurring with the deregulation policies throughout the world and the collapse of the Soviet Bloc. The public's use of communication technology was also increased partially thanks to the mining boom in Mongolia, which tripled the economy and lured in big multinational companies. Foreign capital investment also spilled over to informational acceleration.

The major milestones of (ICT) development in Mongolia were greatly influenced by the Soviets during the socialist time and foreign capital and international politics during the post-communist eras. During the socialist time from 1921 to 1990, information technology development was greatly influenced by the cybernetics developments in the Soviet Bloc. In the 1960-1970's, when the Defense Department's Advanced Research Project Agency launched ARPANET, the Soviets were also working on their own informational network such as OGAS and ESS. Mongolia's National Statistics Office (NSO) in the 1970's created the National Computing Center (NCC) and started to tabulate census data, registration of land resource, and livestock headcounts using mini-computer *Minsk-32* and ES-1040, a German analog of the American IBM 360 supercomputer. In 1982, the NSO started the first ever international information exchange with the Soviet bloc. In 1991 the NSO started networked collection and processing of internal statistical information from the provinces (NSO, n.d.).

Mongolia's ICT development started to diverge from soviet practices with the start of the production of first personal computers. In 1984 NSO engineers created "*Och,*" the first personal computer based on Intel microprocessor (Oyunbayar, n.d.). This invention led to the production of Mongolian produced personal computers *MONEL* starting in 1986, but the company could not continue long facing the flood of less-expensive imported computers from China and East Asia during the collapse of the socialist economy. Then the establishment of the Internet 1996 by DataCom and NSF's support signaled to Mongolians the privatized nature of the internet. Because the internet arrived in Mongolia late following the popularity of the world wide web (WWW), email and the web became the most popular internet applications. Many Mongolians are not familiar with discussion forums, bulletin board system or BBS that fostered big audiences discussing various issues until the recent takeover of online public spheres by social media like Facebook and Twitter.

Prices for internet services remained high in Mongolia until mobile phone operators including MobiCom and Skytel, joint ventures with Japanese Sumitomo and South Korean Telecom, started to provide data packages. Around 2007-2011, partially owing to the mining boom in Mongolia and partially to prepaid card services with SIM (subscriber identification module), the number of mobile phones surpassed the total population of the country. The privatized and liberalized mobile services increased access to the internet, while at the same time exacerbated the divide between better-off urban customers and poor groups in the countryside. With this, Mongolian identity also divides between the urban elites who strive for a cosmopolitan and information society and the people of the nomadic agriculture and mining communities in the countryside.

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[1] CRC (2020). Accessed from crc.gov.mn

Social Media and Defamation

Many Mongolians, who often equate the internet with social media, believe in the inevitable benefits of social media and think that their personal information is irrelevant to Facebook because of their language differences. Commercial platforms like Facebook are "radically indifferent" (Zuboff, 2019) to the social and cultural needs of people in general, especially of those in developing countries. Criticized for its facilitation of the media-incited offline violence and genocide in Myanmar and the Philippines (Stevenson, 2018), a Facebook representative visited Mongolia in 2019 and started to collaborate with local authorities to alleviate the spread of rampant mis/disinformation.

In 2020, the Parliament included the spread of falsehood on social media in Article 13.14 of the Criminal Code. Article 13.14 in the Criminal Code states that a person who disseminates "false information injuring another person's character and professional reputation" will be fined for MNT 450,000 - 1,300,000 (around US$ 157-456) or will be subjected to the 240-720 hours of community service or will have travel privileges taken away for 1-3 months.   In 2020, 590 charges were filed for the distribution of false information related to the political libel, Covid-19 pandemic, and other defamatory statements. In September of 2020, the Police added a new unit designated to fight against the distribution of "blatant lies" on social media. Even though the numbers of cases involving media were relatively low in 2020, the plaintiffs suing journalists and media were state entities and public figures charging them with a lower than "actual malice" threshold. The terms related to misinformation, disinformation, internet defamation, or factual inaccuracies are not defined clearly in the Criminal Codes. This omission or muddying has led to legal interpretations that leave room for practices benefitted law makers and public figures especially during the election year of 2020. This situation creates a "chilling effect" on journalists and media organizations stifling dissent and political criticism against state organizations and public figures.

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