

Secretly Political: Civic Engagement in Online Publics in Kazakhstan

Irina Shklovski and Bjarki Valtysson

The proliferation of networked forms of communication has captured the attention of media and scholars alike. We have never had quite as many resources for communication as we have today, and such communicative potential has implications for social change. In this article we consider public spheres that emerge through communication in the digital realm, paying attention to how networked publics operate within such spheres. We present results from a study of a popular local online discussion forum in Kazakhstan. Steeped in Habermas's idea of the public sphere, this study focuses on cultural public spheres defined through engagement and participation of diverse publics. We consider a range of publics that might emerge, such as mundane-publics, issue-publics, and counter-publics and how these differ in their content and purpose. While the majority of work on networked publics has been situated in states with democratic forms of governance, we consider whether similar constructions are possible in an authoritarian state. We find that networked publics are not only present in an environment rife with online blocking and censorship, but take on a range of forms, generating participation that can at times result in substantial social change, despite the inability to hold open political discussions online.

The tools and means of communication have changed through time, increasing in number, flexibility, reach and ease of access. Technologically defined commu-

Irina Shklovski (Ph.D., Carnegie Mellon University) is an associate professor in digital media, communication, and interaction design at the IT University of Copenhagen. Her research examines how people adapt and integrate an increasingly broad array of information and communication technologies into their daily lives, with a special focus on technology adoption and use under conditions of strain. Her studies of how people use technologies to maintain personal relationships and to cope with adverse circumstances expose how technology use is deeply shaped by local social and political contexts.

Bjarki Valtysson (Ph.D., Roskilde University) is an associate professor in the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen. His research interests include cultural-, media-, and communication policies, democracy, the application and reception of social media within museums, archives and libraries and how these relate to production, distribution, use and consumption in digital cultures.

nivative spaces have become common public venues for information gathering and information exchange.

Yet even as more communication technologies become part of everyday life in different parts of the world, people continue to be censored and conversations that do not adhere to reigning discursive formations of a given society are often limited or silenced. In this article we consider whether and how public spheres might emerge through communication in the digital realm, paying attention to how networked publics operate within such spheres. Different kinds of digital public spheres constitute forums where networked publics communicate—and it is in these spheres where degrees, boundaries, and scales of technologically mediated publicness are negotiated. These negotiations take place not only at a structural level of the architecture of a given media environment, but also at the level of civic agency manifested in the way different types of publics utilize this same media environment.

Concepts such as censorship, networked publics, and public spheres are central to this article where we consider how different kinds of publics communicate within and “tame” a given digital public sphere. Our analysis takes its departure in Habermas’s vision of the public sphere as an ever-changing venue that facilitates the interactions and communication among different kinds of publics (Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1989, 1996). Particularly, we build on Habermas’s later conception of networks of public spheres in complex societies that separates the public sphere into different levels—the episodic, occasional, and abstract—depending on the density of communication, organizational complexity, and range (Habermas, 1996). Here we focus on Habermas’s conceptualization of the networked relations between public spheres and publics. In particular, we are concerned with cultural public spheres manifesting online, where engagement and participation are key constituting processes of civic agency (Dahlgren, 2009).

Although contemporary theorizing of the notion of the public sphere and by extension the concept of networked publics does not require that the environment where such social structures might proliferate is necessarily democratic, the majority of existing scholarly work considers the emergence of networked publics in democratic societies. In this article we consider what form networked publics might take in an authoritarian regime where speech online is actively controlled through censorship. We examine these issues in the context of Kazakhstan. More concretely, we analyze how networked publics constitute civic engagement on an online discussion forum in Kazakhstan despite active state censorship and surveillance. Specifically, we describe three different kinds of networked publics that emerged in our analysis and that are negotiated within the framework of cultural public spheres: *mundane-publics*, *issue-publics*, and *counter-publics*.

In the rest of the article we elaborate on the national context of our investigation and present a detailed description of the case of the discussion forum under study. We then present a theoretical framework and consider theoretical implications through three empirical examples of types of networked publics located within the digital environment of the discussion forum.

The Context of Kazakhstan

The national context in our research is Kazakhstan, a Central Asian country and a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Although the countries of the CIS have undergone many economic and political changes since the breakup of the Soviet Union (Jones Luong, 2002), in Kazakhstan, these larger political changes occurred in the context of continuity of national leadership, thus retaining the structure of authoritarian control (Dave, 2007).

Kazakhstan can be construed as a digitally nascent state (Wei & Kolko, 2005) where average levels of Internet adoption and technical competency are relatively low, though rapidly growing due to decreasing prices for broadband and mobile access. According to the latest statistics, just over 30% of the population reported using the Internet at least once within the last month (Statistics Agency of Kazakhstan, 2011). The government of Kazakhstan engages in a broad effort to develop what they see as the national Kazakh space on the Internet, supporting products and services that are locally defined as “from Kazakhstan” (Shklovski & Struthers, 2010). At the same time the government of Kazakhstan also engages in forms of control, censorship, and site blocking reminiscent of the methods used in other authoritarian regimes (Deibert, Palfrey, Rohozinski, & Zittrain, 2010; MacKinnon, 2009). For example, while there is no official list or a clear set of rules establishing which sites are allowed or disallowed in Kazakhstan, the blocking of sites is at times random, rampant, and known to the users (Shklovski & Struthers, 2010). The majority of online speech, however, is not directly monitored by the government, but through pressuring providers of online spaces such as discussion forums or blog platforms to manage and control the speech in evidence. This kind of outsourcing of censorship to the private sector has been commonly observed in authoritarian regimes (MacKinnon, 2009; Shklovski & Kotamraju, 2011). The practice of such control usually manifests in heavy content moderation oriented toward encouraging self-censorship and caution in the users.

Method

The research presented here is part of an ongoing qualitative research project that investigates how people in Kazakhstan integrate the Internet and other technologies into everyday practices and how these are used for communication and information seeking purposes. The first author conducted 38 semi-structured interviews, two focus groups, as well as many hours of informal conversations and observations over the course of two months in three different cities in Kazakhstan in the spring of 2009 and in the spring of 2010. In the course of initial fieldwork in 2009, one particular site, a discussion forum named Center of Gravity (ct.kz) emerged as an important online discussion space and local information repository in the city of Almaty. This site was the largest and most successful discussion forum in the country, boasting nearly 350,000 active users most of whom were local to

Kazakhstan. Having identified the forum as a site of analytical interest, the first author spent over 12 months monitoring the forum, but without direct participation (as per IRB requirements). In this article we focus on our analysis of this forum as a useful case study.

The interview participants were recruited using snowball sampling initially seeded through personal contacts or encounters in Internet cafés and public spaces. The majority of conversations centered on communication and information seeking practices as well as contributions in the form of blogging or posts on any online discussion spaces. The forum discussed here was not the explicit focus of the interviews and was discussed only if the interviewees spontaneously mentioned it in the course of the conversation.

Participants

Our sample of 38 individual interviews included 8 interview participants who were IT professionals directly involved in the development of Kazakh Internet resources and four interview participants who were prominent local bloggers. The remaining interviews and focus groups were conducted with people of varying socio-economic status and backgrounds and focused on their patterns of everyday use. The sample included 23 men and 15 women aged 18 to 62 (average 35). All interviews were conducted in Russian. In the course of the interviews 18 of the 38 individuals brought up ct.kz without prompting either as an important local informational resource or as an online discussion space where they actively participated. Three other interviewees were directly involved with the site as either employees or volunteer moderators. In this article we focus our analysis on the data from these 21 interviews and our online observations of forum activity.

Data

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data from the forum were saved as dated and annotated texts of the discussions of interest as these were identified through interviews. Following the methods of qualitative data analysis suggested by Emerson and colleagues (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), we developed a coding scheme based on an open coding of forum posts, transcripts, memos, and field notes. Relevant references from the total dataset were combined and summarized to form a coherent narrative for each theme, providing an analytical overview. All quotes presented here were translated from Russian by the first author, who is a native Russian speaker. All names, usernames and initials were changed to preserve confidentiality. Quotes from the interviews are denoted with initials of the interviewee, city, and year, indicating where and when the interview was conducted. Excerpts from forum posts are denoted with initials of the author and the date of the posting.

Considering ct.kz as a Public Sphere

The discussion forum ct.kz—Center of Gravity (Tsentr Tyazhesti)—was developed in 2000 by local Almaty computer programmers in order to have a space where they could exchange ideas, ask advice, and simply hang out. In the course of a decade ct.kz grew to today's respectable traffic of on average between 10,000 and 15,000 visitors daily. Ct.kz is a regional Internet resource that primarily focuses on serving Almaty, the largest city in Kazakhstan. Center of Gravity serves as an informational resource, a space to discuss just about anything from children to cars to the more philosophical questions of love and the Internet, and a place to meet people. Active users, who spend substantial amounts of time on the forum, call themselves "CTshniki" as a denomination of their membership. Throughout the interviews in Almaty the forum emerged as an incontrovertible force at times implicated in various aspects of city life.

It is no surprise that a complex social structure had developed among the forum's administrators, moderators, and users over time that helped manage the volume of traffic and posts. To survive in the atmosphere of censorship and blocking, the site operated under a stringent set of rules that explicitly disallowed any politically charged discussions: "they have a lot of limitations and rules there, moderators pressure" (VB, Almaty, 2009). All posts on the forum were heavily moderated with moderators always explicitly citing the specific rules that users had violated in their public posts in the discussion threads. Severe infractions could be punished by temporary loss of the right to post on the forum, temporary loss of access to a personal account, or even permanent account deletion. The rules and the punishments for their violation were explained in the extensive "forum rules" document accessible from any page on the site. These rules had been developed over the course of the decade of the site's existence to help cope with the influx of users as Internet access became cheaper and more affordable and in part to accommodate the demands of government oversight agencies and an increasing number of state policies governing speech on the Internet. Nevertheless, over the years many communities of various shapes and sizes emerged through the forum. Not allowing people to talk about things that went beyond help and practicality was a way to survive, as expressed by one of the site's employees in an interview: "why talk about things you cannot change?" (CT, Almaty, 2009).

The combination of the administrative structure made necessary by government policies, the threats of surveillance and blocking, and the local social norms of discussion and engagement shaped the interactions that took place within the digital environment of this simple discussion forum software. These shaping forces can be re-conceptualized, following Habermas (1984, 1987) as the *system*, driven by instrumental and strategic actions, and the *lifeworld*, motivated and defined by communicative action. Habermas situates the *system* imperatives in exploiting money and power to mold reigning discursive formations, in this case through surveillance and the threat of blocking or severely limiting the functionality of the site. These objectives then become embedded in the rules of behavior articulated

on the discussion forum and enforced by moderators—a strategic colonization conducted by *system* mechanisms toward consensus-dependent coordination of actions belonging to the *lifeworld*.

The communicative action of the *lifeworld*, in turn, is only partially oriented toward individual desires, but requires actors to negotiate their definitions, thus harmonizing the pursuit of individual goals with commonly held normative assumptions and expectations of rules of behavior. Habermas then, emphasizes the cooperative necessities of communicative action and its importance in transmitting and renewing cultural reproduction, social integration and the formation of solidarity (1987, pp. 137–138). This is encapsulated in the development of norms of behavior on the site, the heavy moderation of foul language and personal attacks, and concerted attempts to generate an environment that welcomes contributions while promoting quality in content.

The *system* and *lifeworld* influence each other through the mediating space of public spheres. In our case, this public sphere was encapsulated in the online discussion forum under study. The codes of conduct set by an authoritarian state, the technical affordances of the discussion forum software, and of course the communications conducted by users shaped the social interaction within the forum. These interactions were therefore marked by both the instrumental and strategic actions of the *system*, as well as the communicative action of the *lifeworld*. As Habermas himself put it: “In complex societies, the public sphere consists of an intermediary structure between the political system, on the one hand, and the private sectors of the lifeworld and functional systems, on the other” (1996, p. 373).

When considered as a public sphere, ct.kz is a digital space that can provide forums for communication for different types of publics as users capitalize on its elastic ability to support a range of interactions and conversations contained and neatly catalogued in sub-forums, themes, and topics of discussion. Habermas (1996) uses the notions of episodic, occasional, and abstract to consider different formations within the public sphere, depending on the density of communication, organizational complexity and range. Building on Habermas, many scholars have made a similar distinction between different kinds of publics that could potentially emerge in any given public sphere. For example, Fraser (1992) proposed a notion of strong and weak publics, where strong publics are composed of “publics whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making” (p. 134), while weak are “publics whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not also encompass decision making” (p. 134). The elastic nature of public spheres then can easily accommodate different kinds of publics including networked publics. According to boyd (2011) networked publics are specific kinds of publics that are simultaneously constituted by the space construed by networked technologies and by the collective that comes to light from the intersection of people, technology, and practice.

In Habermas’s view, the network metaphor is a means to conceptualize the complexity of modern societies and thus does not necessarily have to refer to online environments (1996). Yet we see this as a necessary aspect for theorizing public

spheres and in the case of ct.kz. It is the online environment that facilitates online and occasionally even offline interaction. However, just because ct.kz can be construed as a public sphere, does not mean that networked publics would necessarily emerge through interaction on the site. While the “network”—ct.kz—certainly has the kind of architecture and inherent affordances that could support the emergence of networked publics, it is important to keep in mind that it is the communicative actions within the cultural public spheres that drive the engagement of different forms of publics. It is in the “cultural realm” of the *lifeworld* where knowledge is renewed and transmitted, and where the processes of cultural reproduction, social integration, formation of solidarity, and personal identities thrive.

Indeed, as Dahlgren remarks, *engagement* and *participation* are key in generating such communicative actions: “Engagement refers to subjective states, that is, a mobilized, focused attention on some object” (2009, p. 80)—and to *participate* therefore presupposes *engagement*. These two terms are interlinked: “For engagement to become embodied in participation and thereby give rise to civic agency there must be some connection to practical, do-able activities, where citizens can feel empowered” (Dahlgren, 2009, pp. 80–81). But even though such processes take place on an individual level, they cannot be kept separate from the collective as “the engagement and participation of the citizen are predicated on him/her being connected to others, by civic bonds” (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 81).

In Dahlgren’s view civic bonds are often driven by passions, affinity, and trust, laying the foundations for vibrant civic cultures, which is where civic agency is integrated in a larger perspective of civic cultures. Civic cultures are comprised of six dimensions of mutual reciprocity—*knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices, and identities* (2009, pp. 108–123). As many interviewees pointed out, one of the main purposes of ct.kz was the accumulation of vast stores of locally situated *civic knowledge*. This civic knowledge is grounded in *values* that have elements of affective passions evident in the discussions that surround the production of this knowledge. It is primarily within these kinds of values that civic engagement turns into participation and concrete *practices*. However, in order to take the step from civic engagement to participation, there has to be *trust* among the members of the discussion forum, and of course, a convenient *space* to establish such trust. Ct.kz provides such a space and could act as a convenient platform for civic engagement.

It is important to note that Dahlgren’s dimensions of civic cultures serve as prerequisites to engagement and participation, and we argue that networked publics emerge on the basis of these different forms of engagement and participation. Indeed, in complex societies, all publics are networked by nature. In our case, the affordances inherent in the discussion forum facilitate intra- and inter- relations between publics and public spheres. However, this network is not limited to the online discussion forum, as local concerns can demand that online activity transforms into action offline. It may therefore be more accurate to talk about a multitude of networked publics where the composition of civic agency and civic cultures influences the exact “nature” of the interactions among its participants. Indeed, networked publics “can be reactors, (re)makers and (re)distributors, engaging in

shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange as well as through acts of media reception" (Ito, 2008, p. 3).

Engagement and participation in networked publics are anchored in the cultural reproduction of the *lifeworld*. Yet, because of the fluid inter- and intra-relations of such publics, they can also have different agendas such as the political. The political refers "to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society, antagonism that can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations" (Mouffe, 1999, p. 754). By putting weight on antagonism, Mouffe points to the fluidness of the political and politics. She argues that cultural public spheres, political public spheres, and the fact that the communicative actions taking place in the *lifeworld* with the corresponding processes of cultural reproduction, social integration, and formation of solidarity—also have an antagonistic dimension. As political discussion is censored on ct.kz, the obvious expressly political networked public is not available to us analytically. Yet the fluidness of the political can be embedded within the mundane discussions of the everyday *lifeworld*. The question remains whether the very mundane nature of discussions located on ct.kz can in fact be construed as a kind of politics.

In the rest of the article we present three examples, each representing a different kind of networked public that had emerged on ct.kz in what we identify as mundane, issue, and counter-publics. We analyze each case along the six dimensions of mutual reciprocity proposed by Dahlgren (2009) as these manifest through evidence of engagement and participation. We then discuss the similarities and differences between these three kinds of networked publics and the implications for theorizing networked publics and public spheres.

Of Networked Publics on ct.kz

Example 1: The Obscure and the Mundane—Talking about Homemade Soap

Our first example is comprised of one ongoing discussion thread centered on the topic of homemade soap that originated in April 2009 and where the conversation continues two and a half years later. This particular thread came to our attention during an interview with a soap-making enthusiast in Kazakhstan who brought up the thread as an important source of information and an intimidating community of experienced soap-makers. In her own words: "The girls on there are really serious and experienced and you really don't want to, you know, it's very intense, so I mostly just read for now" (OA, Astana, 2010). Along with the interview, the analysis here is based on 944 posts in the soap-making thread.

Similar to any other hobbyist discussion, this one started with a single question: "Are there any soap-makers in Almaty?" posted in April 2009. Indeed there turned out to be quite a few soap-makers who responded and many have continued their

involvement. The conversation quickly developed into a small hobbyist community with posts exclusively focused on the business of making soap at home. From the start this group of hobbyists used the forum to exchange various kinds of information and to offer each other informational and emotional support. Participants discussed ingredients, techniques, where tools could be bought, and what shapes worked best for which kind of soap.

Over the two years the thread had become a vast repository of soap-making recipes, advice on where to purchase particular ingredients and how-to guides: “also I have a lot of information collected on soap-making. I can email it to anyone who wants it (word files with pictures). Just send a personal message directly so I see your request quicker” (SG posted 05.2009). Requests for information came from those new to the hobby: “Finally worked up to making soap from scratch. Dear soapmakers, please advise is it possible to exchange almond oil for peanut oil [...]? Thanks everyone in advance” (ED posted 03.2011), and those needing advice or rescue in the process of making soap: “girls looks like my first soap-making didn’t work, it isn’t hardening, what to do?” (VK posted 05.2009). These requests tended to receive quick and detailed responses full of supportive suggestions.

Soap-making quickly emerged as a shared value: “Girls, found this thread completely accidentally and got really excited, here are like minds and at work everyone just shrugs and says I’ve gone mad since it’s cheaper to just buy a piece of soap than waste time and invent something” (NP posted 05.2009). These enthusiasts not only inspired each other to try out new techniques, but also conspired to work around the unavailability of certain base ingredients locally by organizing international delivery through leveraging each other’s personal networks of contacts: “I have a father-in-law coming in from Novosib [city in Russia], I will check with him” (LY posted 05.2009). These kinds of conversations were evidence of trust developing among the active discussants of the topic.

As conversations developed on the forum the core groups of soap-makers not only discussed the soap and posted pictures of their creations as bragging rights, but also tried to solve each other’s problems: “post the ingredient list for that soap maybe we can figure out what is coloring your hands and whether it is dangerous” (NP posted 03.2011). The more experienced people offered master-classes and welcomed newcomers with supportive posts: “welcome beginner soap-maker! What are you making soap from? Starting from scratch? What kind of advice do you need?” (SW posted 03.2011).

Despite the primarily online nature of the interactions, there was evidence of a kind of affective community developing where some participants even went so far as to exchange physical artifacts and gifts as they met each other in-person. Soap-making and being a soap-maker was a term freely used by the participants to describe each other and their hobby. They argued over the right way to make soap or which ingredients had bigger health benefits, but soap-making had become part of their identities. Here the discussion forum clearly provided a space where knowledge was exchanged and where through engagement and participation in a mundane activity, people got inspired, organized and changed practices.

Bakardjieva (2009) refers to these acts as subactivism focusing on “a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life” (p. 92). Subactivism is a refraction of the political into the private and the personal. This is not about political power, but rather about personal empowerment—with its frames of reference fluidly responding to “ongoing dialogue between the subject and the cultural discourses permeating his or her social environment” (2009, p. 96). The concept of subactivism is “useful in helping us conceive of a level of the political deeply embedded in everyday life” (2009, p. 96).

Bakardjieva’s subactivism concept is deeply rooted in the practices of everyday life as a constant negotiation of the public and the private—a process that she has on another occasion termed *mundane citizenship*: “Mundane citizenship is firmly rooted in private experiences, needs and concerns, but it overgrows this shell through collective identification and movement from private, interpersonal, group to public discourse” (forthcoming). We see the soap-makers as an example of such a *mundane public*.

Example 2: Addressing Everyday Concerns—Automotive Enthusiasts

Driving in Kazakhstan is mostly done on bad roads between cities and with much traffic within them. As public transport infrastructure ages, more people have to rely on private transportation. Driving in Kazakhstan is not without danger because in this expansive and sparsely populated country the distances are large, the roads are poorly maintained, and formal roadside assistance is not yet a relevant concept. Cars and driving are a popular topic on ct.kz where many sub-forums had been collected under the heading of “Auto.” Given the importance of cars and driving, many interviewees mentioned the forum as an important source of information. Thus this topic emerged as a logical focus of analysis.

The analysis of this case is based on data from 13 interviews. Eight interviewees used the forum as an informational resource or relayed stories of friends using the forum and five were active contributors. The “Auto” section of ct.kz consists of 19 sub-forums, over 20,000 discussion topics and over 1.5 million posts. Through the interviews, we identified the specific themes and threads on the forum to monitor and mine for data. We collected posts that were produced over the course of 7 years on the topics of road conditions, meetings of auto-enthusiasts, car repair shops, road-repair information, and road etiquette.

The most common reason the auto-section of ct.kz was mentioned in the interviews had to do with the vast repository of up-to-date locally relevant information that it had amassed over the years: “I found useful information there: rules of the road, what to do if a cop stops you for example. [...] people there keep track and update the relevant information” (NK, Almaty, 2009). Many threads contained detailed discussions of road conditions on particularly busy or dangerous highways, specific addresses where police road-cameras were located in Almaty or where cops liked to ambush motorists, reviews of good and bad auto-repair shops or car

dealers, and much else. These were well maintained and kept up to date. Many existing threads were started as early as 2004 and continued to be actively updated more than 7 years later.

Cars and discussions about cars can strike at the heart of their owner's identities. Over the course of the decade many sub-forums for specific car brands originated, with car owners at times getting into competitive disagreements. In early 2010, for example, the club of Mercedes owners had a disagreement with the forum moderators and tried to leave in a huff to their own homegrown forum. Yet many drifted back because being CTshniki was also a part of their identity and was often embedded in their cars in the form of a forum-logo bumper sticker: "many cars have this sign on them . . . a barb or a cross—that means that person is a member of the forum" (EM, Almaty, 2009).

Many of the long-time enthusiasts attended in-person meet-ups to show off their cars and accessories to each other and to simply hang out: "Every Thursday clubs gather in the same place. So you can just drive over. New people come" (EM, Almaty, 2009). The oldest is the "auto-Wednesday" weekly meet-up of the general auto-forum, which began meeting in 2004 and continues doing so: "will show up with a thermos of hot tea with lemon! Those who arrive early will get a cup of delicious tea!" (SR posted 11.2011). Such meet-ups helped members develop shared values and demonstrated the importance of the forum and the interaction. The meet-ups also motivated development of trust so that forum-members could seek out companions for long car trips or get advice on tricky car-related purchasing or repair decisions: "This Sunday I am planning on driving to Ust'kam [different city]. If anyone else is going, maybe we can drive together it would be more fun?" (BZ posted 06.2004).

In the decade of its existence, the car enthusiast's forum had undergone several iterations as more users joined the conversation. Although much of the discussion on ct.kz in the automotive threads is focused on this or that car manufacturer or type of driving, over time participants organized to address the very real need for roadside assistance through building a kind of social infrastructure. Since user commitment to the forum understandably varies, two different social sub-structures emerged. As one of the long-time moderators described, early on the core auto-Wednesday meet up group of participants developed what they called a "calling tree" of phone numbers that members kept in their glove box. In the event of a difficult situation or breakdown, they could call anyone who might be closest or available on that list and get help. Certainly this model did not "scale up" to include more members as people joined. Several years ago, a new structure emerged that can be best explained in the words of one of the interviewees:

"So if you have this sign, the barb-sticker [forum logo] on your car, that you are a member of the club, and not just any club but that you are a CTshnik, if something goes wrong and if you are broken down in the middle of the road and another CTshnik drives by, they have never met you before, but they will definitely stop and help, introduce themselves, etc." (EM, Almaty, 2009).

While the bumper sticker represents less of a commitment to help a fellow motorist than handing someone a phone number to call in an emergency, the practice of providing roadside assistance to virtual strangers has generated a kind of mildly jealous admiration of outsiders.

This second example then bears resemblance to what Dayan refers to as *issue-publics*—and lies somewhere between *mundane-publics* and *counter-publics*. These kinds of publics are characterized by their engagement in public problems and their performance is largely definitional and “aimed at determining certain courses of action” (Dayan, 2005, p. 54). Furthermore, these kinds of publics can be linked to the political without necessarily becoming strong publics. In our case, the automotive enthusiasts are very much anchored in the mundane practicalities of everyday life, while at the same time pointing toward a real lack of a particular kind of infrastructure in Kazakhstan.

Example 3: The Voluntary Society of Charity

Like most other CIS countries, Kazakhstan has few policies oriented toward supporting the less fortunate members of the society. The dramatic lack of any real form of a social safety net results in people relying heavily on their personal networks for survival (Rose, 2000). At times, these personal networks simply do not have the necessary resources to provide sufficient help. With few strong non-profit, non-governmental, or religious organizations, institutional charity is a rare concept in an authoritarian system primarily driven by the ideas of market forces, profit, and consumerism. In this environment, regular people sometimes organize to help each other and the voluntary society of charity (DOM—Dobrovol’noe Obschestvo Miloserdia) emerged from heated discussions and nascent organizing on ct.kz into a stand-alone non-profit organization with employees, a charter and a large number of volunteers still primarily organizing through the same discussion forum.

The data analyzed here come from two interviews with active participants of the discussion forum, one interview with a recipient of charitable actions by the discussion forum members, and online discussions identified as relevant during interviews. The charity sub-forum on ct.kz consists of nearly 700 threads and over 50,000 posts. The relevant posts and discussions were collected starting with the original organizing threads of 2006.

The charity group is one of the most striking groups operating on ct.kz, where people started out by organizing volunteers and small donations for orphanages around the city. Over the years the volunteers collected and donated clothing, money and computers, organized birthday parties for children in orphanages and in general tried to help those in need. As one interviewee explained: “they created a repository for the poor, several warehouses around the city so that anyone who wants to just brings things to donate and then out of these things they select who needs what by size and demand. It’s amazing that such people exist to organize such a thing” (LA, Almaty, 2010). The group grew in size and eventually founded a non-

profit organization to help legitimize and streamline their activities: “we are past the level of simply helping out and we have grown too big for such denominations, so it is time we organize into something more formal, with more capabilities” (AS posted 01.2006).

Although the original focus of charity was Almaty due to the fact that the people involved physically resided in the area, charity activities eventually moved to other areas, as groups inspired by the Almaty example organized elsewhere: “People, please provide some advice on how to develop this. I just started getting into charity and don’t really know how to do this properly. Just starting out here in Astana” (MD posted 10.2008).

Over the years the group developed a range of physical and online resources such as warehouses for storing donated goods, relationships with orphanages and hospitals, an official website of the non-profit providing useful documents, and advice to people seeking help and seeking to help. Yet the forum remained the main discussion and organizing space where new volunteers joined ongoing charitable actions of every stripe and kind. Given the ban on political discussions on the forum, any criticism toward existing government structures was measured and controlled. While the non-profit site offers legal documents designed to help parents of sick children to argue for financial support from the government for treatment abroad, discussions on the forum were often skeptical of their value:

I understand that from a certain point of view I am not saying very nice things and that our [local] doctors also work, try to the best of their abilities (tightly limited by the government), but improvements in our health system should not be accomplished at the expense of our children” (LK posted 06.2011).

To provide charity and help, forum users brought to bear individual resources, putting them at the disposal of the common goal. They actively worked to reduce or minimize any barrier to entry for newcomers, by providing up front information for a range of ways to get involved. Such work often spoke for itself, as one aid recipient explained: “Such amazing people! I was shocked; they brought full cars to the village. Our family is large; we hadn’t seen anything like this that it can be like this. Huge bags, we now have everything for the baby” (Zh, Almaty region, 2010).

Among the many practical discussions of aid to specific children or organized actions to help orphanages, affective notes of pleasure of helping and horror at someone else’s plight were common: “thank you all who helped. We managed to collect nearly 1.5 million dollars through SMS. After this I have faith in humanity” (SH posted 07.2010). Underpinning expressions of care were calls for support that while appealing to a sense of obligation to help also seemed to strive toward developing a kind of charitable giving infrastructure:

“the easiest thing is to close your eyes and not notice, saying ‘everyone is for themselves’ or to say that helping these people is the job of the state. The state and not you and I ought to work on ensuring that old people don’t starve to death and

die from loneliness, that families with many children are happy and no-one is left behind. But you and I are part of the state. . . . a lot of times people don't know how to start giving . . . and here we are offering a way to do it" (TA posted 11.2006).

Despite the care with which language was treated on the forum, criticism of the state was occasionally present in a few of the more recent posts: "I am very ashamed of our ministry of health. In a country that is so rich, where nearly the whole periodic table is being extracted, it shouldn't be like this . . . children are dying because of the lack of qualified doctors, resources and infrastructure" (VS posted 08.2010). It is important to note that in the context of the forum, such negative statements directed at the state were practically non-existent at the outset. Over the half-a-decade of the development and growth of the original forum discussants into a formal non-profit charity such expressions of dissatisfaction with the state as a whole began to surface. Although these were often carefully phrased as laments, they nevertheless were examples of the kind of sentiment more common to those engaged in bringing about change, however minute, rather than expressions of impotent rage.

It was precisely through the process of amassing the necessary legal, physical, and informational infrastructure and resources that a strong conscious drive toward bringing about a kind of social change seemed to emerge. This is at least the case when *counter-publics* are seen as alternative discursive arenas engaged in debate and criticism in opposition to a dominating mainstream public sphere (Dahlberg, 2007), or as venues of oppositionality and a dialectic of inward and outward address, emphasizing relations of dominant and subordinate (Brouwer, 2006). Indeed as Warner (2002) notes, *counter-publics* sustain (consciously or not) "an awareness of its subordinate status" (p. 119). Finally, Fraser (1992) refers to such publics as subaltern counter-publics describing them as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 122). This is precisely what is at stake in our final example where charity becomes a political concept in a society that rarely recognizes and promotes the values associated with such work.

Discussion

We have described how the network—ct.kz—facilitates the emergence of three different kinds of publics—*mundane-*, *issue-*, and *counter-publics*—within the context of action that is censored. Discussion of particular political matters is disallowed—a clear example of a strategic colonization from the authoritarian *system* towards the communicative actions in the *lifeworld*. Yet even though the discussion forum encourages communication and practices that directly relate to the mundane rather than the political—these cannot easily be separated. We have discussed this from the viewpoint of Habermas, Fraser, and Mouffe pointing toward the fluidity

between cultural and political public spheres, strong and weak publics, and the political and politics.

On ct.kz the tensions or antagonisms caused by the fluidity of the political were formally not “allowed” to travel in the open from the cultural opinion-making spheres to the political decision-making spheres—yet they inevitably did so in a more mundane, subtle manner. Indeed, as our data shows, the online and offline communication that the discussion forum generated could spur on forms of civic engagement and participation. The three different kinds of publics, *mundane-*, *issue-* and *counter-*publics, were all anchored in the *lifeworld*. However, because of the inherently networked construction of all inter- and intra-relations between publics and public spheres, we trace how the organization and implementation of everyday activities took different forms, thereby challenging rigid distinctions between cultural and political public spheres. Indeed, the different types of publics in question either remain as mundane publics, as is the case with the soap-making hobbyists, or they blur the mundane-political distinction, as is the case with the issue-publics of the automotive enthusiasts. Finally, the charity case takes us one step further locating itself on the borders of the political and politics, constituting a counter-public that while remaining embedded in mundane everyday activities also constitutes a political edge.

Habermas (2006) considers an independent self-regulating media system and an anonymous empowered audience that can provide feedback as fundamental aspects of political deliberation, a point which Dahlberg supports from the viewpoint of online deliberative forums (2001). This is, of course, not fully the case with the activity that takes place on ct.kz because this activity does not quite live up to Habermas’ and Dahlberg’s preconditions for deliberative practices. Yet despite censorship and surveillance the communicating publics on this discussion forum successfully generate forms of civic engagement and participation. These are not dominant publics in the traditional sense. They are negotiated networked publics that generate particular communication patterns within this specific network of public spheres—ct.kz. These negotiations are bound within the communicative actions of cultural public spheres, but despite censorship they at times inadvertently reach into the political realm, thereby representing oppositionality towards the system.

Ct.kz facilitates a multitude of overlapping networked publics that operate with different agendas depending on which dimension of civic culture they want to promote, what kind of engagement drives these publics, and what kind of participation this engagement entails. They are networked by the very nature of how ct.kz is constructed as an online discussion forum, but they are also networked because they facilitate communication in complex societies. Ct.kz is therefore a particular space where specific knowledge and values are celebrated, and where specific issues are permitted to stay in the open, which allows for a certain kind of civic engagement, practices and participation. Indeed, because of its forbidden link to politics, ct.kz becomes a space of subactivism where the mundane knowledge, values and practices of cultural public spheres thrive and organize. However, as

our analysis implies, these networked publics can still be political—just secretly political.

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