

Restricted Information Space and the Escalation of Ethnic Conflict: Information Vacuum and Misinformation in the Osh Conflict in Kyrgyzstan in 2010

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The work discusses how information vacuums and the misuse of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) intensified ethnic violence during the 2010 Osh Conflict in Kyrgyzstan. The inter-ethnic clashes between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities resulted in hundreds of deaths and displaced over 400,000 individuals. Government shutdowns of the internet and censorship of media generated an information vacuum where misinformation could circulate freely, causing fear and mistrust. Using the theory of Communicative Opportunity Structures, this research examines how the breakdown of formal communication channels like state media and inter-group networks forced information circulation to informal and frequently unverifiable sources. Counterfactual analysis shows how a different set of communication strategies would have reduced violence. The study also contrasts the Osh violence and contemporary trends in misinformation, like the ones published on private media like Telegram, to illustrate how emerging technologies can escalate tensions when accurate information is scarce. Through a brief comparison of the Osh conflict with other conflicts in the region, the study traces special dynamics and repeating patterns through which limited communication leads to violence. It ultimately stresses the need for open communication in crisis management and highlights what can go wrong with censorship during conflicts.

Keywords: Osh Conflict, misinformation, ICT, ethnic violence, information vacuum

1 Introduction

The Osh Conflict stands as a rare case study of how, during large-scale uncertainty, the spread of misinformation can fuel ethnic tensions—particularly when amplified by censorship and rapid technological change. The conflict, spanning several days of intense ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, resulted in the displacement of 400,000 people and hundreds of deaths. It illustrates how government-imposed information vacuums, combined with the rapid proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), can exacerbate such crises in Central Asia.

Kyrgyzstan was the most digitally advanced nation in Central Asia with rising public engagement on digital media: “The Internet is becoming a source of information for the masses.” While the other Central Asian governments had been censoring critical sites for years, Kyrgyzstan began internet censoring only in 2005¹.

This being the case, it had one of the region’s most liberal information regimes, encompassing socio-political activism and a relatively liberal media environment. The state began a national ICT policy in 2000 through the assistance of agencies such as the UNDP, IREX, and the Soros-Kyrgyzstan Foundation.

This paper examines how government-imposed information restrictions and the spread of misinformation through ICTs escalated ethnic violence during the 2010 Osh Conflict in Kyrgyzstan. It argues that the creation of an information vacuum—intensified by censorship, lack of credible media, and uncontrolled digital communication—played a central role in fueling panic and deepening interethnic tensions.

The core research question is: How did the government-imposed information vacuum and the role of ICTs during the Osh Conflict contribute to the spread of misinformation and the escalation of violence? By situating this case within the framework of Communicative Opportunity Structures, the paper explores how disrupted communication systems affected public perception, risk behavior, and social trust during crisis.

2 Literature Review

Establishing the context of the Osh Conflict, it now becomes crucial to assess how critical previous research and theoretical frameworks give insight into the role of information vacuums and ICTs. The next section will discuss the crucial works and notions that build a base for such a complex interaction of government actions and technological factors.

The literature on censorship and information vacuums discussed by scholars^{2,3} reveals how the specific suppression of data can create particularly conducive circumstances for the spread of misinformation, especially during crises. When accurate information is suppressed or held back, an information vacuum will sprout up, fueling rumors and lies as people try to fill the knowledge gap. The phenomenological theories⁴, explain that during high-stakes situations characterized by fear, people are more likely to believe and share unproven data since verified information is rarely available during such times.

The research underlines something of a paradox in censorship: although censorship is to keep control and prevent agitation, it can increase tension paradoxically through the creation of an atmosphere where misinformation flourishes. For instance, provides an example of collaboration on how censorship might eventually backfire and block out information control in heightening public panic². This insight is pivotal to appreciating the perverse effects of controlling information in times of crisis.

In respect to this, the case of the 2010 Osh Conflict is illustrative as to how information vacuums and ICTs can be used in order to proliferate organized misinformation, which in effect only strengthens violent conflicts and social unrest^{5,6}.

Study⁵ establishes the dual use that ICTs have in post-Soviet conflicts and underlines that, in the case of Kyrgyzstan during the Osh conflict, ICTs have supported the mobilization of communities, on one side, and allowed the rapid diffusion of critical information on the other. At the same time, however, such a speed in the diffusion of information allowed rumors and propaganda to diffuse, establishing the paradox of digital communication in crisis, where the frontier between information and disinformation is blurred.

Further this line of argument by zeroing in on the Kyrgyz government's role in constituting an information vacuum during the Osh conflict. They hold that the lack of credible updates from the government, because of its strict control over information, allowed misinformation to flourish and added to the growth of ethnic hatred and violence⁶.

These studies put together show how information vacuums and ICTs interact in shaping conflict dynamics. It has shown the dual nature of ICTs for mobilization and misinformation⁵, highlight critical government-imposed controls over information flows⁶. This paper brings such perspectives together in one place and hence offers an integrated understanding of how these factors jointly contributed to an escalation of ethnic violence during the Osh conflict. It provides an analysis of the interplay of government controls and ICTs in bridging gaps between theory and practice in understanding the ways in which information dynamics may mitigate or escalate conflict in similar contexts.

3 Methodology

This study follows a qualitative case study approach, drawing on both secondary literature and digital content to explore how restricted information flow and ICT use contributed to the escalation of the Osh Conflict.

The secondary sources include academic studies, reports by international organizations (such as the UN and OSCE), and media analyses. These provide context on the political situation, government response, and communication environment in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010.

To understand how misinformation spread during the conflict, publicly available digital content from the time, including archived forum posts, social media messages, and online news articles were reviewed. Materials were selected based on their relevance to the conflict, the frequency with which they were shared or cited, and their availability through public archives. Most of these sources were in Kyrgyz and Russian, reflecting the dominant languages used in the public digital space. However, select Uzbek-language materials were also included, particularly from diaspora platforms and regional blogs reporting from the perspective of the Uzbek minority.

The digital sample includes approximately 40 items collected from cached Facebook material, domestic news websites such as Kloop and Ferghana News, and publicly available forum posts on websites such as Diesel and Akipress, from June to July 2010. They were selected on the grounds of material relevance to the conflict, coverage of Osh and nearby locations, and availability to the public. Posts were also analyzed for ethnically targeted narrative presence, emotional tone, and evidence of misinformation. That is useful to guide deeper understanding of how people reacted to and engaged with information during the conflict, and how an institutional absence of reliable and timely communication contributed to an escalation of violence.

4 Analysis

This part delves into a detailed analysis of the Osh Conflict, applying the methodological framework to unpack the complex interplay of political instability, ethnic tensions, and information dynamics that so characterized this pivotal event in Kyrgyzstan's recent history.

4.1 Communicative Opportunity Structure

The Communicative Opportunity Structures, as described by Schulz, refer to the structures that enable or constrain communication in society. These structures include state media, public information channels, and inter-group networks. In the event that these structures fail to operate, people turn to non-formal communication means, which could be less dependable or more emotional.

In this study, Communicative Opportunity Structures are rendered operational by four central factors: (1) availability and credibility of formal channels of communication (such as state television broadcasts); (2) access to cyber infrastructure such as internet and mobile networks (approximately 39% penetration of internet in 2010); (3) degree and timing of censorship by the state, such as media censorship and cutting mobile networks; and (4) volume and affective content of informal communication, such as social media updates, forum posts, and messaging on mobile phones. These variables allow us to evaluate how disruptions in formal communication networks created the space for misinformation to run rampant, often unmonitored. Measuring each of these variables is to understand better how the breakdown of solid lines of communication led to reliance on—and vulnerability to—rumor-based, ethnically charged narratives.

During the Osh Conflict, several of these structures collapsed at the same time. The state media was no longer a credible source of information. Rather than providing balanced reports, it either denied reporting or disseminated selective reporting. In the meantime, communications between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities broke down, with mutual trust eroded by traditional antagonisms and fear. Although Kyrgyzstan had a developed ICT infrastructure, the government during the crisis blocked internet and mobile access. This blocking made it even harder for citizens to receive reliable information.

In this context, mobile phones and messaging services filled the vacuum. But rather than calming tensions, they did the opposite. ICTs can also help people mobilize and spread dangerous misinformation⁵. In Osh, people used mobile networks to send threats, inflammatory videos, and rumors. The messages became virulent and circulated to massive audiences largely without oversight or fact-checking. When normal channels of communication were disrupted, these unofficial channels were the main way of getting information—giving rise to fear and demanding revenge.

Looking at the conflict in this way helps to illustrate how the breakdown of formal, trusted communication allowed space for harmful narratives. It also highlights how, in times of crisis, the means people have to stay connected can either defuse tension or multiply it, based on how they are used and by whom.

4.2 Background of the Osh Conflict 2010

Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked Central Asian country that has witnessed tremendous political turbulence ever since gaining independence in 1991. It is also sharply divided between the northern and southern parts of the nation, each with its specific political and cultural orientations. This division played an essential role in events preceding the conflict in Osh in 2010.

In April 2010, President Kurmanbek Bakiyev—who was especially popular in the south of the country—was forced out of office by mass demonstrations in the capital, Bishkek. There-

after, the “second revolution” unleashed a power vacuum, particularly in the southern part of the country, whereby supporters and clan members of Bakiyev aimed to restore his rule. Again, the extra eradication of Bakiyev’s regime from power, which lay at the core of organized crime and corruption, weakened the already fragile security forces further⁵.

There were historical tensions in the south between the Kyrgyz majority and the Uzbek minority, partly because of economic disparities and also due to a number of historic grievances. Those tensions burst into startling violence on June 10, 2010, after an Uzbek crowd confronted police and Kyrgyz residents in Osh, leading to an escalation of violence that enveloped the area in widespread killings, looting, and arson. More than 470 people, mostly Uzbeks, were killed in the incident, and several thousand were displaced⁷.

Matveeva, Savin, and Faizullaev discuss that the violence spiraled out of control as the provisional government headed by Roza Otunbayeva proved unable to gain control over the situation. The response from the central government was very disorganized, with security forces overwhelmed and unable to manage the crisis effectively. The conflict was magnified by the failure in early warning and the general lack of trust in law enforcement, which was compromised by corruption and inefficiency².

The Osh riot of 2010 was one of the most intense ethnic confrontations that Kyrgyzstan had experienced within recent decades, resulting from serious ethnic hatred, a power vacuum consequent to the removal of Bakiyev, and an inability on the government’s part to handle the growing crisis.

4.3 The Role of ICT in Ethnic Conflicts: Peace Catalyst or War Lord?

The media in ethnic conflicts will always play dual roles—it either promotes peace through dialogue or inflames violence through divisive narratives. According to the official report on the June 2010 events, during the Osh ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan, mobile phones, among other ICTs, helped spread misinformation. Mobile technology made rapid mobilization and the spreading of ethnically inflammatory propaganda possible, as groups of “sportsmen” (youth associated with political and criminal figures) and “special purpose female units” (OBON) were speedily mobilized through mobile networks⁷.

The Kyrgyzstan Ministry of Transport and Communications reports that cell phones distributed unverified and inflammatory video clips of interethnic violence that were believed to be true by a predominantly young audience. Moreover, threatening messages were sent to the ethnic Uzbek refugees with the aim of making them go back or meet severe repercussions, thus fueling fear and generating mistrust. When people needed truthful and official information from the state, the national media and state channels in Kyrgyzstan chose instead to broadcast irrelevant

programs¹.

4.4 Kyrgyz Information Space

Matveeva discusses that ICT infrastructures have been quickly developing in Kyrgyzstan, and in 2010, around 39% used the Internet, with mobile phone use very popular. Internet access and quality were better in the capital and other urban cities, which are better off than rural areas. The information space in Kyrgyzstan has so far remained hosted by the legacy of state-controlled media from the post-Soviet era. As such, the environment is hardly conducive to the growth of independent journalism⁵.

This further led to an extreme fragmentation of the information space during the conflict. Government-controlled media reported one-sidedly while censoring or blocking other sources, really opening the floodgates of misinformation. In this information vacuum, rumors spread profusely, feeding ethnic tensions. Scant and late reporting by national media with restricted access to independent information made the population susceptible to manipulation and attested to a dire need for open channels of communication during times of conflict.

4.5 Government

Though intended to maintain order, the government's information control had unintended, far-reaching consequences. The following section explores how such measures for control inadvertently managed to worsen ethnic tensions.

The Kyrgyz government went all out to control the flow of information in the aftermath of violence in Osh, imposing media censorship and restricting the Internet. These measures were apparently aimed at dealing with misinformation, but instead, they contributed significantly to the creation of an information vacuum. This was also due to the government's efforts to suppress critical reporting, thereby leaving the population at the mercy of rumormongers and false-narrative purveyors⁸.

The government further tried to control the use of ICTs by switching off mobile networks in cases of unrest. This was meant to inhibit the circulation of extremist content, particularly on concerns about religious extremism and terrorism. All this did was crush legitimate channels of communication, forcing the public to return to unverified sources and believe the data that was transmitted orally by phone calls, which only increased the speed of distribution of unreliable content⁹.

The government's concern about the influence of media led to the ban on websites perceived to perpetuate undesirable narratives, such as the ban on "Ferghana News", which was accused of providing "subjective information" about the crisis. This culminated in the complete ban of independent and conservative media, allowing misinformation to thrive, feeding the violence with long-term consequences for ethnic relationships and stability in Kyrgyzstan¹⁰.

As a result of this conflict, much credibility was lost by the government. In addition, confidence among the public was quite difficult to reestablish because of the lack of transparency in communications on time, and even hindered the processes of reconciliation. Suppression of independent media coupled with a lack of accurate information about events during the conflict had long-lasting effects on how ethnic tensions and social cohesion would be managed by the government in Kyrgyzstan.

4.6 Loss of Control Over the Narrative

A block on independent media allowed fake reports such as "invasion of Russian tanks into Kyrgyzstan to assist one ethnic group, or the story of Uzbeks stockpiling weapons intending to attack others". Harboring fears and historical grievances, such rumors resonated deeply with existing tensions and further escalated violence beyond the government's control⁵.

These rumors correspond to the general trend of traditionally rooted fears and mistrust among Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities, and that is why they spread virally. In the absence of any credible information, "implausible" stories became believable, which, consequently, led to retaliation on both sides by means of violent backlash.

Such is the inability to ensure control over the narrative that its echoes lasted long after the event. Public skepticism about government information indeed persisted for years after the conflict, inhibiting reconciliation and good governance. Characterized by a lack of accurate information, the legacy of the crisis is fear and division, which is quite problematic for a state to ensure order and unity. These kinds of rumors would have been swiftly neutralized if there had been open lines of communication so that they would have limited impacts on the conflict⁹.

4.7 Counterfactual Analysis: What Could Have Been Done Differently?

To understand the power of a government-imposed vacuum, it is valuable to consider a counterfactual analysis of alternative scenarios that would, in turn, provide a series of more effective strategies for crisis communication and conflict management.

The price of the information blackout was deep, not just in terms of the immediate violence but also in the long-term destabilization of the region. By suppressing these credible sources of information, the opportunity was forfeited to the government to guide information, to clear the air and to ensure the situation did not spin out of control. If "Ferghana News", among other independent media, had been allowed to continue reporting, it is highly possible that the spread of false rumors, such as Russian tanks entering the region, would have been countered through actual reporting. If the government had elected to stay true to open information channels and therefore was able to communicate any timely forthcoming information to the public, this

would have helped to quell some of the panic and the fear that drove violence by the Kyrgyz against the Uzbeks.

However, this possibility must be considered alongside research that shows independent media can also deepen conflict if perceived as biased. For example, Ahmed (2010) found that during the 2002 Gujarat riots in India, media outlets were distrusted by certain ethnic groups and, in some cases, contributed to violence when reporting was seen as partisan. In Osh, a similar dynamic likely existed. Given the polarized atmosphere and deep-rooted ethnic mistrust, Kyrgyz audiences may not have trusted information from media associated with Uzbek voices, and vice versa.

Therefore, the potential effectiveness of open media depends on two key factors: public trust in the source and the perceived neutrality of reporting. While credible alternatives may have reduced confusion, they may not have been enough to prevent violence in such a fragmented environment. Still, this analysis highlights the importance of building trust in communication infrastructure before crises occur, and ensuring that diverse voices have access to platforms in times of conflict.

5 Conclusion

This work offers additional insight into how Information and Communication Technologies, combined with government-imposed information vacuums, fueled misinformation and deepened ethnic violence.

The "Communicative Opportunity Structure" theory unveils that when there are no official sources of information, unofficial ones will fill the gap, typically spreading fear and violence. In Osh, as after communication networks were broken and free media coverage was absent, rumors of Russian tanks having crossed into Kyrgyzstan or Uzbeks preparing to attack raced around, raising tensions⁵.

Counterfactual analysis suggests the conflict might have been less severe, or at least better managed, under different communications strategies. Among the main findings of the study is that open communications channels and free media could have reduced the impact of misinformation by calming the fears of the public and promoting more rational responses.

The Osh conflict dynamics echo in the contemporary digital era. For example, Telegram's private messaging platforms with limited supervision have been used for spreading misinformation and inciting violence, as seen in the UK's Southport case¹¹. Like the informal communication structures of the Osh conflict, these private platforms typically have no credible sources and verification mechanisms, which allow rumors to easily circulate. The Osh case illustrates how, in the absence of trusted public communication, people turn to unofficial channels, both in the past and today, with potentially dangerous outcomes. While the tools may have evolved, the core issue remains: unregulated

misinformation continues to threaten social stability and escalate conflict.

The Osh conflict is a compelling historical example that teaches us today about the role of misinformation in violence during the era of digital media. It is a problem that needs to be tackled by learning from the past, applying lessons learned to current platforms, and using more informed policy interventions to harness the potential of digital media for crisis prevention and response. This study included various Uzbek-language sources, i.e., diaspora media outlets such as Ozodlik Radiosi, to represent opinion within the Uzbek populace.

Access online in 2010 to other, more diverse Uzbek-language content was restricted. A lot of what was found in the open and archived was in Russian and Kyrgyz, which attests to overall imbalances in access to media and digital archiving, as opposed to exclusion. This reliance on publicly available digital content—without interviews, fieldwork, or self-collected social media data—also threatens selection bias, as more emotive or more viral content will be more easily stored and accessed. Though Communicative Opportunity Structures theory guided analysis, its constituent factors (e.g., breakdown of infrastructure, trust in media) are not easily quantified and analyzed here.

These limitations suggest that further research would be facilitated with greater availability of sources, improved text analysis, and triangulation with first-hand information to sharpen insight and increase accuracy. Although this research holds fast to the postulation that open lines of communication can encapsulate violence in ethnic conflict, regional comparisons bear witness to the same. In Kazakhstan, where inter-ethnic clashes have erupted from time to time (like the 2020 Dzungars-Kazakhs clashes), the government response emphasized rapid communication and open information via official media, social media, and public outreach. Although imperfect, this response contained misinformation more and stemmed further escalation better than in the Osh case, where information flow was very restricted. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan's media censorship and lack of objective, credible sources of information during the Osh conflict created widespread panic and dissemination of rumors. These instances show that while open communication does not rule out conflict, it is essential for preventing escalation and restoration of public trust. These patterns are not specific to Kyrgyzstan. For instance, during the 2002 Gujarat riots in India, limited access to trustworthy sources of information and the spread of emotionally evocative, ethnically divisive content also instigated violence, even in the presence of formal media¹². Facebook was utilized to spread anti-Rohingya propaganda in Myanmar, showing how ICTs can be manipulated in vulnerable communicative ecologies. Yet Kyrgyzstan's case is distinct in that the government positively created a vacuum of information, rather than merely failing to moderate content. This addresses two distinct dangers: the absence of credible information, as in Kyrgyzstan, and the unregulated flow of disinformation, as in

India or Myanmar. Each can destabilize societies, yet through distinct mechanisms.

Findings of this study point to the urgent need for robust communication systems and proactive strategies to prevent or manage conflict. Ensuring the free flow of accurate information during crises is essential to counteract misinformation and reduce the risk of violence. By examining past conflicts through a modern lens, we gain insight into how digital misinformation spreads and how it can be addressed in today's increasingly polarized global environment.

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