

Trapped in a Virtual Cage:

Chinese State Repression of Uyghurs Online

UHRP

UYGHUR HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT

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Cover image: Composite of 9 Uyghurs imprisoned for their online activity assembled by the Uyghur Human Rights Project. Image credits:

Top left: Memetjan Abdullah, courtesy of Radio Free Asia

Top center: Mehbube Ablesh, courtesy of Radio Free Asia

Top right: Ablikim Abdiriyim, UHRP photo

Middle left: Gulmire Imin

Middle center: Dilshat Perhat, courtesy of Diyarim.com

Middle right: Mutellip Imin, courtesy of Uyghur Online

Bottom left: Ilham Tohti, June 12, 2010 © Frederic J Brown/AFP/Getty Images

Bottom center: Gheyret Niyaz, March 25, 2010. Radio Free Asia screen grab from Uyghur Online

Bottom right: Tursunjan Hezim in Aksu, July 5, 2007. Courtesy of Erkin Sidik

I. Executive Summary

On July 5, 2009, after security forces violently suppressed a Uyghur demonstration in Urumchi, Chinese state officials cut all Internet service across East Turkestan. More than 20 million people in a vast region covering one sixth of China's landmass faced ten months in an Internet wilderness. The shutdown, accompanied by severance of long distance phone calls and SMS services, not only cut communication between friends and family at a time of political unrest, but also permitted the Chinese government to control the outward flow of non-state information about the turmoil in the region.

This unprecedented episode is emblematic of the Chinese officials' fear that counter-narratives of widespread dissatisfaction among Uyghurs with government policies and contrary accounts of conditions in East Turkestan will offer an insight into state violations of Uyghurs' human rights. Simply put, the Internet in East Turkestan does not serve as a point of state accountability and catalyst of change, as it does in many parts of the world, but as a tool of state propaganda and a medium to root out peaceful opposition.

Trapped in a Virtual Cage: Chinese State Repression of Uyghurs Online documents how Chinese authorities have exerted effective control over how Uyghur seek, receive and impart information online in East Turkestan including technical and legislative strategies, as well as the use of the criminal justice system to create an atmosphere of fear, intimidation and self-censorship.

The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) interviewed a number of Uyghurs versed in the Internet culture of East Turkestan, experts on Chinese Internet censorship, as well as regular Uyghur users of the Internet. From the interviews and from numerous secondary sources, UHRP researchers concluded Internet users in East Turkestan, especially those from the Uyghur community, face directed censorship, denial of access and targeted detentions. The measures enacted by Chinese officials have resulted in an Internet space among Uyghurs that is not only tiny in comparison to its population, but also demonstrates the violation of the fundamental right to freedom of speech and association.

In East Turkestan, the Chinese state particularly employs the measure of Internet blackouts, complete Internet shutdowns in a localized area, as illustrated in the post-July 5, 2009 period. However, censorship and blocking of content posted online is also of great concern. Although, censorship and blocking of content is prevalent across China, moderators of the popular Chinese social media site Sina Weibo deleted 50% of social media posts in East Turkestan as opposed to 10% of posts in Beijing, according to a Carnegie Mellon University study. UHRP also found that websites with religious or political content were rare within China, although these were common subjects in diaspora Uyghur sites. Furthermore, references to Islam and Uyghur history were more likely to run afoul of the censors than other subjects.

UHRP records that the 2009 Internet shutdown and subsequent "restoration" of service was a devastating loss of information across a broad spectrum of subjects concerning Uyghurs, as an estimate of over 80% of Uyghur websites did not return after Internet

service was restored. Sites such as Diyarim, Salkin and Xabnam disappeared and with them millions of BBS posts by Uyghurs. In addition, according to Uyghurs interviewed by UHRP, the Internet culture among Uyghurs post-2009 turned much more circumspect with self-censorship the predominant characteristic of online expression. Several Uyghur interviewees expressed the sentiment that the already narrow confines of free speech had been additionally constricted.

The People's Republic of China has also employed legal instruments to ensure the Internet in East Turkestan remains an antithesis to the open forum experienced in democratic nations. In addition to a national legislative framework to deny Chinese citizens the ability to freely seek, receive and impart information online, regional and local authorities in East Turkestan deny residents, especially Uyghurs, the right to freedom of speech and association. In order to suppress offline freedoms of expression and association, the Chinese government has often conflated peaceful dissent with the crimes of terrorism, endangering state security or "splittism." Online peaceful dissent is no different and Chinese officials have targeted Uyghurs with these charges for their Internet activity.

The detention of webmasters and bloggers, especially from the Uighurbiz, Diyarim, Salkin and Xabnam websites is an illustration of Chinese officials implementing this hardline. Salkin contributor, Gulmire Imin, received a life sentence for "splittism, leaking state secrets and organizing an illegal demonstration;" Diyarim founder and webmaster, Dilshat Perhat was handed five years imprisonment on "endangering state security charges;" Xabnam webmaster, Nijat Azat was sentenced to ten years imprisonment for "endangering state security;" and founder of Uighurbiz, Ilham Tohti is currently facing charges of "splittism." All of these cases fell far short of international standards of due process.

Trapped in a Virtual Cage: Chinese State Repression of Uyghurs Online discusses how Chinese censors regularly fail to delete overtly racist and discriminatory posts by Chinese Internet users directed at Uyghurs while contributions to websites by Uyghurs displaying opposition to government policy lead to censorship and on frequent occasion criminal charges. Uyghur people face discrimination while using Chinese social media sites like Sina Weibo, WeChat and Renren including obstacles to signing up, posting content, and even searching for Uyghur names. Furthermore, the report discusses increasingly sophisticated cyberattacks emanating from China targeting the websites of overseas Uyghur groups. The evidence collected by UHRP demonstrates China's contempt for international standards of freedom of speech and association and question China's ability to serve as a responsible member of the international community of nations.

UHRP urges the Chinese government to meet its international obligations and observe its own laws regarding freedom of speech and association. UHRP also encourages the Chinese government to view the Internet as a platform for open debate and reconciliation. The Chinese authorities should support an atmosphere of freedom of speech on Uyghur political, economic, social and cultural issues online to ensure a rational and transparent discussion between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. Furthermore, UHRP asks the international

community to publicly express concern over the severe limitations placed on Uyghur online freedom and urge China to review and reform its body of regulations governing the Internet in order to meet international standards. Concerned governments should support an international effort to stop online censorship and work towards a comprehensive and enforceable United Nations instrument protecting the right of Internet users to freely seek, receive and impart information.

II. Methodology

The information for this report was gathered using a variety of primary and secondary sources. UHRP researchers conducted interviews in Uyghur, Chinese and English with Uyghur witnesses. Interview subjects were selected randomly through existing networks and through a willingness to speak.

Finding eyewitnesses prepared to relate accounts of their experiences is never an easy task. The long reach of Chinese government repression in East Turkestan extends beyond the region to Uyghur exiles, even those in democratic nations. For this reason, UHRP offered complete anonymity to interviewees. In order to protect interview subjects, UHRP changed identifying details.

In order to describe changes to Uyghur websites after 2009, UHRP extensively accessed the digital archives compiled by the Wayback Machine, a project of the Internet Archive, a non-profit organization based in San Francisco, California. The software crawls the web to create an archive of website snapshots, allowing users to access old versions of websites even if the sites are no longer available. This is particularly useful in looking back at Uyghur sites that were taken down, enabling access not only to static content like the “About Us” pages of deleted Uyghur websites, but also to view dynamic content like website counters and message boards.

Secondary sources accessed included media from inside and outside of China in Uyghur, Mandarin and English, reports from human rights groups, government documents and academic research papers.

III. Background

Infrastructure and Internet Penetration Rates

China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) makes data about the country's Internet available through the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). Information is available for each provincial level region, including East Turkestan.

According to the CNNIC statistics, the proportion of East Turkestan's population that has Internet access is 49%, or 10,094,000 total users, which comprised around 1.8% of all Internet users in China at the end of December 2013.¹ The total number of Internet users in China is 618 million, or 45.8% of China's total population. Relative to the rest of the country, the proportion of the population with Internet access in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) ranks 9th on a listing of 31 province-level regions in the country.

In spite of this relatively high rate of Internet penetration, the quality of the connection is oftentimes poor. China Cache reports that East Turkestan has the slowest connection rates in China.²

Although CNNIC's access statistics are not disaggregated by ethnicity, there is delineation at the national level between rural and urban Internet users and this data provides useful insights. While urban users comprise 71.4% of all Internet users, rural users constitute only 28.6%.³

In East Turkestan, the Han account for a far greater proportion of the urban population. According to a joint study by researchers from the University of Ottawa and Xinjiang Normal University in 2010, 25 counties in southwestern East Turkestan make up 47% of the region's total population but only 19% its urban population, and this populace is over 90% non-Han. In addition, 20 of the 25 counties in this region are classified as "poverty stricken counties."⁴ A 2012 study from Stanford University Rural Education Action Program links poverty to lower rates of computer ownership and Internet usage, and also

¹China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). (2014, January 27). *33rd Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*. Retrieved from <http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201404/U020140417607531610855.pdf>.

² ChinaCache. (2012, October 30). *ChinaCache Releases Third Quarter 2012 China Internet Connection Speed Ranking*. Retrieved from <http://www.chinacache.com/index.php/about-chinacache/news-and-releases/82-chinacache-releases-third-quarter-2012-china-internet-connection-speed-rankings>.

³ This national level designation refers to an overall rural population in China of 47.4%. See: China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). (2014, January 27). *33rd Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*. Retrieved from <http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201404/U020140417607531610855.pdf>.

⁴ Cao, Huhua and Anwaer Maimaitiming. (2010). *Urban-rural Income Disparity and Urbanization: What is the Role of Spatial Distribution of Ethnic Groups? A Case Study of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in Western China*. *Regional Studies*: Vol 44, No. 8. pp. 965-982. Retrieved from <http://www.chinaeam.uottawa.ca/eng/pubcao/Cao-Urban-rural%20Disparity%20in%20Xinjiang-2008.pdf>.

found that non-Han rural residents had lower rates of Internet access than Han rural residents in China's Qinghai province.⁵

The rural-urban divide and the attendant implications for internet penetration and accessibility suggest that although Uyghurs comprise 47% of the total population of East Turkestan (around 10.4 million people according to official sources in 2011), they more than likely constitute a far smaller percentage of the total 10 million Internet users in the region. The Han, on the other hand, who are overwhelmingly clustered in urban areas and comprise 38% of the population (roughly 8.4 million), can be expected to form the bulk of Internet users in the region.

Another indicator of Internet accessibility in the region is the availability of a broadband connection. CNNIC reports that 71% of the country had access to broadband by the end of 2012.⁶ Broadband access in East Turkestan has also expanded widely in recent years. Beginning in 2008, commercial Internet access in China has been managed by three large state-owned companies: China Telecom, China Unicom and China Mobile. China Telecom, the largest fixed line service provider in China announced that it had more than 2 million broadband users in East Turkestan since it entered the region in 2004. It reported having invested 10 billion Yuan (\$1.6 billion USD) in the region and providing coverage to 70% of the total administrative villages in East Turkestan. During China's 12th 5-year plan (2011-15) the company is scheduled to invest 20 billion Yuan (\$3.2 billion USD) in broadband network projects regionally.⁷ Other Internet service providers in East Turkestan include China Mobile, which started its operations in 1998, and China Unicom, which has been servicing the region since 2008.⁸

The rural-urban divide is especially pronounced with regard to broadband network accessibility. For example, China Telecom maintains that it provides broadband access to 98% of townships, 95% of the paramilitary *bingtuan* areas and 100% of cities, but only 53% of rural areas.⁹ This suggests that the Uyghurs have the least amount of broadband connectivity, given that they predominantly reside in rural areas.

Though official figures do not track data related to ethnicity and Internet penetration rates, it may be gleaned that the Uyghurs enjoy significantly fewer benefits than their

⁵ Stanford University and Chinese Academy of Sciences, Rural Education Action Project (REAP). (2010, April). *Ownership, Access and Use of Computers, Information Technology and Other E-Technologies by Students in Suburban Beijing Schools*. Retrieved from http://iis-db.stanford.edu/res/2954/Report_on_Student_Technology_Access_Suburban_Public_Schools.pdf.

⁶ China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). (2013, July). *32nd Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*. Retrieved from <http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201310/P020131029430558704972.pdf>.

⁷ Chinadaily.com. (2012, September 7). *China Telecom has 2m broadband users in Xinjiang*. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-09/07/content_15744273.htm.

⁸ For more on China Mobile see: http://www.10086.cn/aboutus/culture/intro/province_culture_intro/xj/. For China Unicom see: <http://www.chinaunicom.com.cn/city/xinjiang/>.

⁹ Xinjiang Telecom. *新疆电信三项服务承诺 [Xinjiang Telecom's Three Pledges]*. Retrieved from <http://10000zhidao.xj.189.cn/exinfo.jsp?areaid=23&id=4291&code=4003&icode=4012>

Han counterparts from state investment in broadband in East Turkestan. This lack of broadband access forms a significant impediment for a large portion of the Uyghur population to accessing the Internet more broadly.



Internet Café in Hotan ©Wikicommons

Point of Access

In a series of interviews with Uyghur Internet users conducted by UHRP research staff in 2013 and 2014, Uyghur web users described accessing the Internet from home computers in urban areas, laptops in Inner China connected to the educational network (*jiaoyu wang*), and Internet cafés. The majority of respondents said that they accessed the Internet from home computers in urban hubs with many of their families having purchased home computers in the early and mid-2000s. Many respondents described visits to Internet cafés as infrequent. A Uyghur high school student described Internet cafés as “unsafe,”¹⁰ and another high school student explained it was “a bad place for students.”¹¹ A middle-aged businessman said the Internet cafés were a place where you would be monitored and videotaped (especially if you were Uyghur), and where arrests were common.¹²

These accounts reflect not only the trend of greater access in urban areas, but also other user patterns that are evident in CNNIC’s reports about changes in the ways people in China access the Internet. The report indicates that on a national level, in 2013 the proportion of people accessing the Internet from Internet cafés declined to 18.7% from

¹⁰ Interviewee 5 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

¹¹ Interviewee 4 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

¹² Interviewee 3 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

36% in 2010.¹³ In 2014, 89.5% of users access the Internet from home, 32.5% from work, 11.3% from school, and 14.6% from a public place.¹⁴ These figures have not been disaggregated for East Turkestan.

Mobile Internet access has also grown widespread in China. By January 2009, the MIIT issued different 3G licenses to China Unicom, China Telecom, and China Mobile enabling them to offer Internet access via mobile phones throughout the country.¹⁵ Today, there are over 500 million mobile Internet users in China, and 81% of all Internet users in China connect via mobile phones. East Turkestan makes up 1.7% of China's mobile Internet users (and about 1.6% of China's total population).¹⁶ As with broadband access, these numbers need to be understood within the context of the rural-urban divide. CNNIC reports that only 25.3% of mobile Internet users live in rural areas and 74.7% reside in cities and towns. As Uyghurs disproportionately inhabit rural areas, it may be assumed that they are able to access the Internet via mobile devices at a much lower rate than their Han counterparts who are largely urban.

The findings from the interviews reveal that most of the student-aged Uyghurs from urban areas connect to the Internet via mobile phone. Young Uyghurs described using both legitimate phone services operated by the state-run agencies, as well as accessing a market of unregistered phone cards which can be purchased on the street in Urumchi, called *heika* (Chinese for black card).¹⁷ These cards can be purchased for 50 Yuan (\$8 USD), and offer some degree of anonymity as they can be discarded after use. This enabled some users to post content on websites that would be otherwise be censored and this issue is discussed further in the following sections of this report.

China's Internet Controls

In order to fully understand the manner in which the Internet in China functions, it is necessary to understand how it is controlled. Forms of Internet control range from the macro-level (such as blocking access to the entire Internet), to micro-level tactics such as the tailored censorship of specific websites or search terms. At the macro-level, Internet access has been disabled in East Turkestan, most significantly for a period of roughly ten months from 2009-2010 and this is discussed in greater detail in Section V. Connection speeds can also be slowed down to render the Internet unusable, known as "Web

¹³ Watts, Elleka. (2013, July 26). *The Decline of China's Internet Cafes*. The Diplomat. Retrieved from <http://thediplomat.com/2013/07/the-decline-of-chinas-internet-cafes/>.

¹⁴ China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). (2014, January 27). *33rd Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*. Retrieved from <http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201404/U020140417607531610855.pdf>

¹⁵ Lemon, Sumner. (2009, January 7). *After Years of Delays, China Finally Issues 3G Licenses*. PCWorld. Retrieved from <http://www.pcworld.com/article/156612/article.html>.

¹⁶ The rate of urban to rural users is a national average, and the ratio within XUAR administrative area is not disaggregated. See: China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). (2013, October). *中国手机浏览器用户研究报告 [China Mobile Web User Research Report]*. Retrieved from <http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201404/U020140417607531610855.pdf>.

¹⁷ Interviewee 4 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

throttling,” which has been observed throughout China, especially during politically significant moments, such as in advance of National People’s Congress meetings.¹⁸

A more targeted means through which China controls the Internet is to block unwanted foreign content. The system of automated filtering of foreign websites is termed the Golden Shield Project, or colloquially referred to as the “Great Firewall.” In this system, entire website domain names or Internet protocol (IP) addresses can be blocked. This layer of censorship targets a wide range of foreign websites, including media and social media, any websites with political messaging deemed inappropriate by China’s government, and pornographic websites. Uyghur websites, including the Uyghur Human Rights Project, Uyghur American Association, and World Uyghur Congress are blocked. News sites which offer Uyghur services, such as Radio Free Asia, are also blocked. In addition, some of the world’s most popular websites, including Google, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, are blocked as well as major media outlets such as the New York Times and Wall Street Journal.¹⁹

Another targeted censorship mechanism is TCP (transmission control protocol) connection blocking, which restricts content even though the actual website itself is not blocked. Filters embedded in the Internet backbone, as well as provincial networks, monitor all traffic for certain keywords, a list which is constantly evolving and expanding in response to new censorship directives. According to a 2010 University of Michigan study about Internet filtering in China, two Internet backbone filtering devices were located within East Turkestan.²⁰ When a blocked keyword is detected, the search results or page containing the keyword will cause a user’s connection to be cut off. For the user who has triggered one of the keywords, the system will display an error message saying the “Connection has been reset.” Therefore, although the website as a whole is not blocked, the message may seem to indicate a problem with just one single page on the website, giving no hint that the actual problem is the censorship of content.

Censorship mechanisms are also embedded within websites in which users can input content, such as BBS (bulletin board system) forums, chatrooms, and comments sections of news websites, blogs and microblogs. As with TCP blocking, a list of keywords is maintained and posts are filtered, so that those containing the blocked words will register an error message or result in a severed connection. Keywords relating to Uyghurs including “Xinjiang” are frequently blocked.²¹ In addition, manual censors further

¹⁸ Earp, Madeline. (2013, July). *Throttling Dissent: China’s New Leaders Refine Internet Control*. Freedom House. Retrieved from http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/Throttling%20Dissent_FOTN%202013_China_0.pdf.

¹⁹ For a list of popular blocked Websites see: <https://en.greatfire.org/search/alexa-top-1000-domains>. Greatfire.org also allows users to test any web address for accessibility from various access points in China.

²⁰ Xu, Xueyang, Morley Z. Mao, and Alex J. Halderman. (2011, March 20) *Internet Censorship in China: Where Does the Filtering Occur?* Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on Passive and Active Measurement. Retrieved from <http://pam2011.gatech.edu/papers/pam2011--Xu.pdf>.

²¹ Greatfire.org. *Censorship of Xinjiang in China*. Retrieved from <https://en.greatfire.org/search/all/%E6%96%B0%E7%96%86>.

monitor posts for non-allowable content and delete them either shortly before they are published or soon thereafter. This censorship is not applied uniformly. A Carnegie Mellon study published in 2012 found that more than half of social media posts were deleted in regions of Tibet, Qinghai and East Turkestan that experienced high degrees of overall censorship, while only 10% were deleted in Beijing and Shanghai.²²

Finally, beyond simply censoring content, the government also retains a network of “paid netizens” to post comments and messages that shape the online discourse in ways that are favorable to the regime. These netizens are called the *wu mao dang*, or “50 cent party,” and the moniker is derived from what they are allegedly paid per post. The impact of this type of infiltration on the citizens’ collective psyche is particularly insidious, given that in addition to actively changing people’s conversations online, the presence of state agents in these forums adds an element of suspicion and distrust that colors the overall conversation. Thus, by blocking unrestricted foreign websites, preventing users from viewing content containing sensitive words, and preventing users from posting content containing sensitive words, and infusing the conversation with government propaganda, the regime actively manipulates what users do and see online.

Uyghur Websites In Relation to Other Websites in China and Abroad

The total proportion of China’s websites that are hosted in East Turkestan is far lower than the proportion of China’s netizens in the region, which is 1.6%. According to CNNIC’s 2013 report, the total number of websites operated from East Turkestan numbers 7,595 or just 0.2% of all the websites in China. There are around 61 million total pages contained within those websites (around 35 million are static and 26 million dynamic), which account for 0.04% of the total web pages in China.²³

By comparison, neighboring Afghanistan, which has a significantly lower GDP than East Turkestan, hosts around 90,000 domains, about 3 websites per 1,000 people.²⁴ In East Turkestan, that rate is only 0.35 websites per 1,000 people.

One observer in *Foreign Policy* commenting on the small proportion of sites based in the region contends that: “The disparity likely means that people in Xinjiang want to be connected but are loath to set up their own sites.”²⁵

²² Bamman, David, Brendan O’Connor, and Noah A. Smith. (2012, March 5). *Censorship and deletion practices in Chinese social media*. First Monday. Retrieved from <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3943/3169>.

²³ China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). (2014, January 27). *33rd Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*. Retrieved from <http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201404/U020140417607531610855.pdf>.

²⁴ Propel Steps Blog. (2013, November 12). *Know : Total Number of Websites : Country wise*. Retrieved from <http://propelsteps.wordpress.com/2013/11/12/know-total-number-of-websites-country-wise/>.

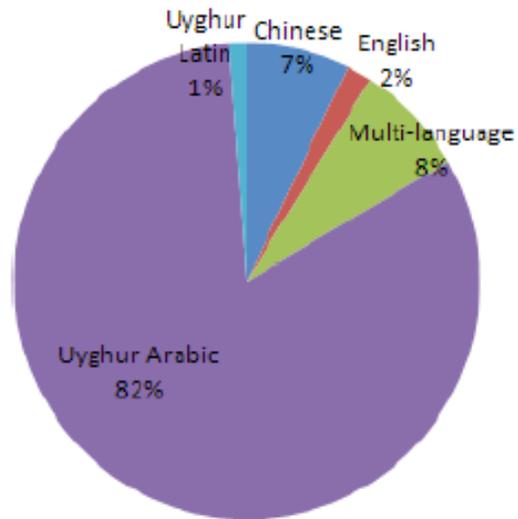
²⁵ Olesen, Alexa. (2014, April 21). *Welcome to the Uyghur Web*. Foreign Policy. Retrieved from http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/04/21/life_on_chinas_censored_uyghur_web.

A survey conducted from October 2009-late 2010 by Internet scholar Dilnur Reyhan for the E-diasporas Project identified a total of 843 Uyghur websites, of which 680 were hosted in East Turkestan, 17 in China, and 146 abroad.²⁶ Based on the CNNIC survey of October 2010, which listed a total of 3,721 websites in the region, these 680 Uyghur-run websites make up only 18% of the total sites hosted in East Turkestan in 2009.²⁷ Enver Uyghur, an expert quoted in Foreign Policy, estimates that today there are 2,000 Uyghur sites, which is about a quarter of the total websites hosted in East Turkestan based on CNNIC's 2013 statistics.²⁸

Dilnur Reyhan's 2009-2010 survey provides additional information about Uyghur websites by analyzing 151 of the sites, forums and blogs located in East Turkestan, which were selected based on frequency of updates and the level of connectivity. In terms of language, Reyhan found that the majority of the Uyghur-run websites hosted in China were in Uyghur written Arabic script, a total of 82%. Only 7% were in Chinese, 8% were multilingual, 2% in English, and 1% in Uyghur written in the Latin alphabet.

Reyhan's 2010 study also sheds light on the types of Uyghur websites that existed at the time of her survey. Reyhan classifies the largest category of the sites as "diverse," 24%, which include mixed content such as news and entertainment posts by webmasters, as well as BBS forums with thousands of registered users. "Education" is the next largest category (12%). Reyhan notes that this includes two government sites and a number of personal sites. The third largest category of "literature" (11%), according to Reyhan "consists essentially of Uyghur classical, religious or historical books in PDF version. Some personal blogs devoted to literature are the poems of young Uyghurs who speak essentially of preserving Uyghur culture and tradition." The next largest categories (8% each) are "entertainment," "commerce," and "culture." Entertainment includes music video and film websites; commerce includes shopping sites, and culture includes sites dedicated to Uyghur culture.

Chart: Languages of Uyghur Websites in East Turkestan



Graph courtesy of Dilnur Reyhan, e-Diasporas

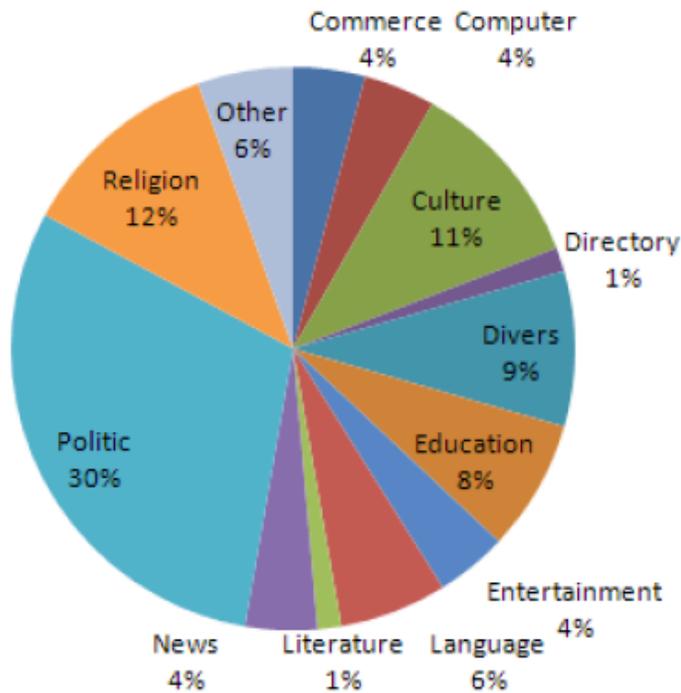
²⁶ Reyhan, Dilnur. (2012, April). *Uyghur diaspora and Internet*. E-Diaspora Atlas. Retrieved from: <http://www.e-diasporas.fr/working-papers/Reyhan-Uyghurs-EN.pdf>.

²⁷ China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). (2010, January). *中国互联网络发展状况统计报告. [25th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China]*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzj/hlwzbg/201001/P020120709345300487558.pdf>.

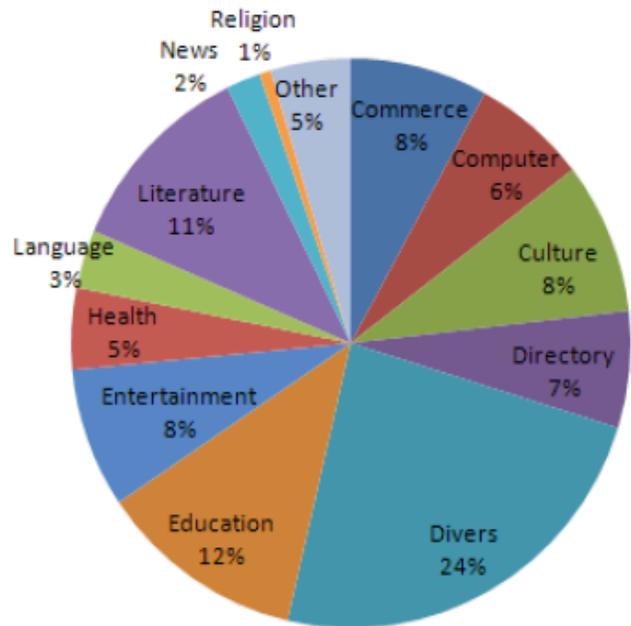
²⁸ Olesen, Alexa. (2014, April 21). *Welcome to the Uighur Web*. Foreign Policy. Retrieved from http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/04/21/life_on_chinas_censored_uighur_web.

Charts: Types of Uyghur Websites in the Diaspora (left) and in East Turkestan (right)

Uyghur Diasporic Websites



Uyghur Websites in East Turkestan



Graphs courtesy of Dilnur Reyhan, e-Diasporas

Reyhan’s research illustrates a marked difference in the content of Uyghur websites hosted in East Turkestan and those hosted abroad. The study clearly shows that while politics and religion are a major concern for Uyghurs overseas, they were not the main subjects of dedicated websites within East Turkestan. Other subjects, like culture, education, news, and computers figured as prominent topics of interest amongst both groups.

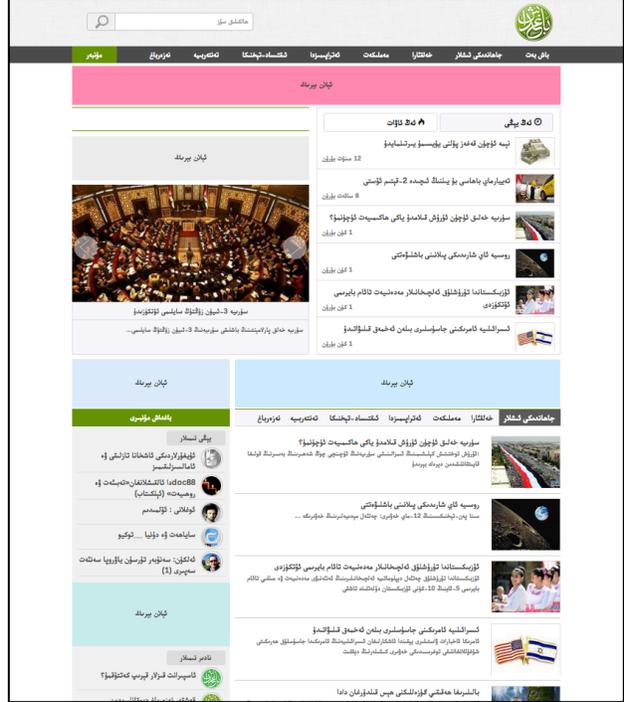
- Politics is represented by 44 sites abroad, and none in China.
- 61% of cultural sites are hosted abroad.
- Education is split between 62% of sites in China and 38% abroad.
- News websites are also shared between 6 sites in the diaspora and 7 in China.
- Religion is only discussed on a personal website in Inner China, none in East Turkestan. Of 17 sites abroad, 5 are in Turkey, 4 in the USA, 3 in Saudi Arabia, and 1 each in Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal and the UK.
- Computers/technology are the main subjects of 10 sites in China, and 7 abroad.
- The largest category between the sites, “diverse,” refers to websites that address all the other themes. Those hosted within China may have political content from Chinese media, whereas those hosted abroad include a wider range of sources.

Image: Screenshots of examples of four categories of Uyghur Websites

Site: Bilimlar
Category: Education



Site: Bagdax
Category: Diverse



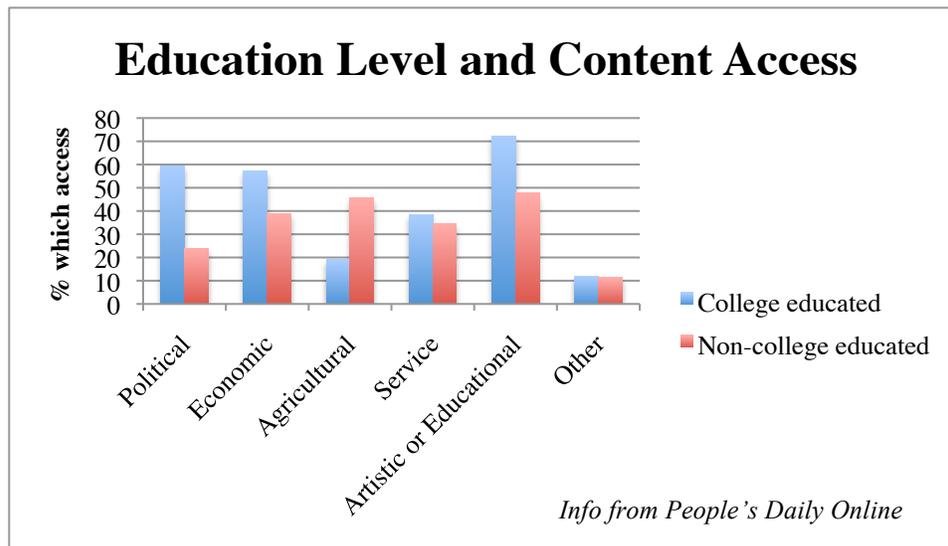
Site: Nahxilar
Category: Music



Site: Okyan
Category: Computer



A 2012 Chinese state survey analyzed differences in Internet usage of 400 Uyghurs who had completed higher education and those who did not.²⁹ With regard to the language of their Internet use, the survey found that 63% of all netizens accessed the web in the Uyghur language. However, college-educated Uyghurs accessed Chinese websites at a rate of 51%, whereas only 18% of Uyghurs who did not attend college reported accessing Chinese language websites. There was also a significant split based on education with regard to the types of content they accessed. The college-educated netizens tended to access political, economic and artistic/educational content at significantly higher rates. In contrast, the high school-educated netizens tended to access websites that contained predominantly agricultural content at a higher rate.³⁰ See the following chart that highlights the specific types of content accessed by both groups:



Given both the small percentage of websites hosted in East Turkestan and the even smaller proportion of websites that are operated in the Uyghur language, it is unsurprising that many Uyghurs (and particularly those educated in Chinese) also frequently access Chinese language websites, and in particular, Chinese social media. In total, 597 million people in China are estimated to be active on social media, 91% of the online population and 42% of the total population.³¹ Uyghurs interviewed by UHRP reported using Chinese social media websites, including QZone, Tencent and Sina Weibo, WeChat and Renren.

²⁹ Chen Xin and Yang Jieqiong. (2013, May 15). 新疆维吾尔族受众受教育程度与网络接触研究. [Study of Education Level and Internet Access Amongst Xinjiang Uyghurs]. 人民网 [People's Daily Online]. Retrieved from: <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2013/0515/c40628-21494013.html>.

³⁰ These results contradict the findings of Dilnur Reyhan, who identifies very few articles about agriculture, and found that high school-educated Uyghurs generally accessed forums and Uyghur national, cultural, and historical information and articles. Interview with the author, April 2014.

³¹ Kemp, Simon. (2014, January 9). *Social, Digital and Mobile Worldwide in 2014*. We are Social Blog. Retrieved from: <http://wearesocial.net/blog/2014/01/social-digital-mobile-worldwide-2014/>.

The proportion of Chinese social media users who are Uyghur remains unknown at this time. In a 2012 University of Hong Kong study of censorship on Sina Weibo, a random sampling of posts taken from the site included <0.57% of posts from East Turkestan.³² A systematic survey conducted by Internet scholar Jason Q. Ng on the geolocation of users posting on Sina Weibo in February 2013 identified only 0.67% from East Turkestan over the course of one week.³³ This number is much lower than the 1.8% figure of China's netizens who are located in East Turkestan. Of course, not all Sina Weibo users are located in China, and some netizens in East Turkestan, particularly those Uyghurs who cannot speak Chinese, are unable to use Sina Weibo.

Language barriers constitute a major problem vis-à-vis accessibility: none of the major Chinese social media sites offer Uyghur language input, though Uyghur can be written in Latin characters as needed. Another factor that contributes to the lower proportion of posts from the region is the targeted discrimination against Uyghurs that results in their posts being dropped from the websites. This trend will be discussed at length in Section VII.

Existing statistics on Internet accessibility rates (including both broadband and mobile web access) indicate a growing portion of Uyghur people is now connected to the Internet. The Han community in East Turkestan is likely to enjoy higher rates of access and command a greater share of websites hosted in the region. Nevertheless, the region reportedly suffers the slowest rate of connectivity in China in terms of connection speed, hosts among the lowest number of websites, and was the target of the longest Internet shutdown in global history. China's all-encompassing censorship mechanisms – from the Great Firewall, to connection blocking of key words, to the manual deletion of posts, and government-sponsored commentary – are employed routinely and effectively in East Turkestan. In East Turkestan in particular, China's government goes even further in curtailing online expression and specifically targets Uyghur netizens.

³² Fu, King-wa and Michael Chau. (2013, March 8). *Reality Check for the Chinese Microblog Space: A Random Sampling Approach*. PLoS ONE 8(3): e58356. Retrieved from <http://www.plosone.org/article/fetchObject.action?uri=info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0058356&representation=PDF>.

³³ Ng, Jason. (2013, March 1). *<Where do Weibo users live? City and provincial breakdown of various Chinese Internet statistics>*. Blocked on Weibo Blog. Retrieved from: <http://blockedonweibo.tumblr.com/post/44289028375/where-do-weibo-users-live-city-and-provincial>.

IV. Legislation

International

International human rights instruments that have been codified within the United Nations system specify the fundamental right to free expression and association. Although the formulation of these human rights instruments preceded the Internet age, it is generally accepted within international law that the rights they articulate apply to online activity as well.

Regarding freedom of expression, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.³⁴

The right to freedom of expression is also protected under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),³⁵ as well as Article 5.d.viii of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD).³⁶

The right to freedom of association is outlined in Article 20 of the UDHR³⁷ and in Article 22 of the ICCPR,³⁸ as well as Article 5.d.ix of CERD.³⁹

The clearest articulation that the rights of freedom of expression and association are applicable to online activity is contained in a non-binding resolution passed by the

³⁴ United Nations. (1948, December 10). *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

³⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1976, March 23). *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>.

³⁶ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1965, 21 December). *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CERD.aspx>.

³⁷ United Nations (UN). (1948, December 10). *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

³⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1976, March 23). *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>.

³⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1965, 21 December). *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CERD.aspx>.

Human Rights Council on July 5, 2012.⁴⁰ It should be noted that Resolution A/HRC/20/L.13 received the endorsement of the Chinese government and it:⁴¹

Affirms that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression, which is applicable regardless of frontiers and through any media of one's choice, in accordance with articles 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.⁴²

The resolution followed two 2011 reports by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.⁴³ The *Report of the Special Rapporteur to the General Assembly on the right to freedom of opinion and expression exercised through the Internet* emphasized the importance of the Internet in encouraging citizen journalism, especially when access to newsworthy incidents is restricted to traditional journalists. The report illustrates how: "images recorded on mobile phones or messages posted online by bloggers and social networking sites have played a key role in keeping the international community informed of the situation on the ground."⁴⁴

Furthermore, the report asserts that "to prohibit a site or an information dissemination system from publishing material solely on the basis that it may be critical of the government or the political social system espoused by the government" is inconsistent with human rights protections guaranteeing freedom of speech.⁴⁵ It also states that any state that enacts retaliatory measures, such as "arbitrary arrest, torture, threats to life and killing," against individuals responsible for online content critical of the government are in violation of article 19 of the UDHR and ICCPR.⁴⁶

The report also anticipates the inseparability of technological innovation and human rights norms and states that:

⁴⁰ Sengupta, Somini. (2012, July 6). *U.N. Affirms Internet Freedom as a Basic Right*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/06/so-the-united-nations-affirms-internet-freedom-as-a-basic-right-now-what/>.

⁴¹ Freedom House. (2012, July 6). *Landmark UN Resolution an Important Step for Global Internet Freedom*. Retrieved from <http://www.freedomhouse.org/article/landmark-un-resolution-important-step-global-internet-freedom#.U391FSiARUQ>.

⁴² United Nations General Assembly. (2012, June 29). *The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet*. Retrieved from <http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/19/64/51/6999c512.pdf>.

⁴³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (Unknown). *Freedom of Opinion and Expression – Annual Reports*. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomOpinion/Pages/Annual.aspx>.

⁴⁴ United Nations General Assembly. (2011, August 10). *Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression*. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/A.66.290.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

...by explicitly providing that everyone has the right to freedom of expression through any media of choice, regardless of frontiers, articles 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights were drafted with the foresight to include and accommodate future technological developments through which individuals may exercise this right.⁴⁷

In the second of the 2011 reports, the *Report of the Special Rapporteur on key trends and challenges to the right of all individuals to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds through the Internet*, concern regarding a number of aspects of Internet censorship was highlighted. In paragraph 29, the Special Rapporteur raises concerns over state measures to block access to content through “preventing users from accessing specific websites, Internet Protocol (IP) addresses, domain name extensions, the taking down of websites from the web server where they are hosted, or using filtering technologies to exclude pages containing keywords or other specific content from appearing.”⁴⁸

With regard to wholesale government shutdowns of the Internet, the report states: “While blocking and filtering measures deny access to certain content on the Internet, States have also taken measures to cut off access to the Internet entirely. The Special Rapporteur is deeply concerned by discussions regarding a centralized “on/off” control over Internet traffic.” In paragraph 42, the Special Rapporteur adds that private entities should not be made responsible for censorship and liable for content of which they are not the authors.

The report also focuses on the issue of criminalization of online expression that contravenes the “official” government narrative and states that:

...whether it is through the application of existing criminal laws to online expression, or through the creation of new laws specifically designed to criminalize expression on the Internet. Such laws are often justified on the basis of protecting an individual’s reputation, national security or countering terrorism, but in practice are used to censor content that the Government and other powerful entities do not like or agree with.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid. See also Declaration of Principles at World Summit on the Information Society Geneva, which states: “The use of ICTs and content creation should respect human rights and fundamental freedoms of others, including personal privacy, and the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in conformity with relevant international instruments.” Available at: <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>.

⁴⁸ United Nations General Assembly. (2011, May 16). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom and Expression*, Frank La Rue. Retrieved from <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G11/132/01/PDF/G1113201.pdf?OpenElement>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

China

Administration

Administrative control of Internet security in China is conducted across a multitude of government departments. While the official literature publicly touts measures that provide increased access to the Internet and ongoing improvements to existing infrastructure, government officials are simultaneously involved in regulating, monitoring, and censoring the Internet.⁵⁰

The 1994 Regulations on the People's Republic of China for the Protection of the Safety of Computer Information Systems "tasked the MPS [Ministry of Public Security] with the security protection work of computer information systems in general, while the Ministry of State Security (MSS), the National Secrets Bureau (NSB) and other relevant ministries and commissions of the State Council, such as the Ministry of the Information Industry (MII), and Ministry of Culture (MC) etc. were tasked with aspects of security protection of computer systems within their jurisdiction."⁵¹

According to a 2012 paper by scholars, Xu Jing and Hu Yueming of Beijing University, in total 85 "rule-making bodies," including ministries and NGOs/GONGOs [Government Organized NGOs], are responsible for Internet governance in China.⁵² Notable among these "rule-making bodies" is the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), which was approved by the National People's Congress in March 2008 and inaugurated in June the same year. According to Chinese state media, the MIIT replaced the Ministry of the Information Industry (MII) and comprised 24 departments.⁵³ The main responsibilities of the MIIT include "promoting the development of major technological equipment and indigenous innovation; administrating communication sector; guiding the construction of information system; safeguarding the information

⁵⁰ Ai Lijiao. (2013). *The impact of government regulation to the Chinese social networking systems (SNS) users in China*. Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand. Retrieved from [http://unitec.researchbank.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10652/2336/Lijiao%20Ai\(Elle\)_2013-06-20.pdf](http://unitec.researchbank.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10652/2336/Lijiao%20Ai(Elle)_2013-06-20.pdf).

⁵¹ Herold, David Kurt and Marolt, Peter. *Online Society in China*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013). p.41.

⁵² Xu Jing and Hu Yueming. (May 2012). *The Nature and Characteristics of Internet Governance in China: A Content Analysis of 430 Chinese Laws and Regulations*. Retrieved from <http://www.cmdconf.net/2012/makale/86.pdf>. According to OpenNet, "our research indicates that at least a dozen entities have authority over Internet access and content in some form." OpenNet adds: Moreover, the number of regulatory bodies with a role in Internet control has increased. This may indicate intra-governmental competition for a voice in shaping a medium viewed as vital to China's economic growth and political stability." See: <https://opennet.net/studies/china#toc2c>. For an example of an NGO regulation see: *Self-Discipline Convention for Blog Services* <http://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2007/08/21/self-discipline-convention-for-blog-services/>.

⁵³ Xinhua. (2008, June 30). *Ministry of Industry and Information Technology Inaugurated*. Retrieved from http://www.china.org.cn/government/news/2008-06/30/content_15906787.htm.

security of China.”⁵⁴ Regional offices of MIIT exist across China, including in East Turkestan.⁵⁵

According to Xu and Hu, the establishment of the State Internet Information Office in May 2011 was an attempt to solve “the problem of functional overlapping with decentralized management...by centralized and integrated management.”⁵⁶ A *China Daily* article dated May 4, 2011 explained that the new entity was to “direct, coordinate and supervise online content management and handle administrative approval of businesses related to online news reporting.”⁵⁷ The *China Daily* article describes how the office is also charged with not only conducting “government online publicity work,” but also “to investigate and punish websites violating laws and regulations”⁵⁸ However, in a January 21, 2014 article it described China’s administration of the Internet as “mired in bureaucracy and overseen by a number of government agencies, including SARFT [State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television], the State Council and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, which can lead to conflicts of interest between these bodies.”⁵⁹

The State Internet Information Office was also to be “engaged in promoting construction of major news websites,”⁶⁰ which stresses the government’s push to control narratives within China. The move follows the establishment in 2010 of the Internet News Coordination Bureau, which aimed to monitor interactive forums in China through the enforcement of guidelines governing news-related items. According to an April 16, 2010 article in the *New York Times*: “Chinese officials consider tools like social networking, microblogging and video-sharing sites a major vulnerability.”⁶¹

In its 2013 *Freedom on the Net* survey, Freedom House classifies China’s Internet as “Not Free.” The report describes how officials avail themselves of “a politicized legal system to pursue selective prosecutions of dozens of people;” adding: “Ethnic minorities in regions where CCP rule is disputed or resented, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, are

⁵⁴ Global Times. (2013). *Ministry of Industry and Information Technology*. Retrieved from <http://www.globaltimes.cn/db/government/6.shtml>.

⁵⁵ See: 新疆维吾尔自治区通信管理局 [*Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Communications Administration Bureau*] homepage. <http://xjcainfo.miitbeian.gov.cn/state/outPortal/loginPortal.action>.

⁵⁶ Hu, Yueming and Jing Xu. (2012, May 11). *The Nature and Characteristics of Internet Governance in China: A Content Analysis of 430 Chinese Laws and Regulations*. Peking University, China. Retrieved from <http://www.cmdconf.net/2012/makale/86.pdf>

⁵⁷ China Daily (2011, May 4). *China Sets up State Internet Information Office*. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-05/04/content_12440782.htm

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Carsten, Paul. (2014, January 21). *China orders real name register for online video uploads*. Reuters. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/21/us-china-internet-idUSBREA0K04T20140121>.

⁶⁰ Xinhua. (2011, May 4). *China sets up office for Internet information management*. Retrieved from http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-05/04/c_13857911.htm.

⁶¹ Ansfield, Jonathan. (2010, April 16). *China Starts New Bureau to Curb Web*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/17/world/asia/17chinaweb.html>.

particularly vulnerable.” Countering Chinese government claims (discussed below), Freedom House concludes that extensive filtering and censorship denies Internet users the right of freedom of speech.⁶²

Regulation

A White Paper issued by the Information Office of the State Council on June 8, 2010 entitled, *The Internet in China* outlines the government’s approach to Internet policy in China. The White Paper states that: “China adheres to scientific and effective Internet administration by law, strives to improve an Internet administration system combining laws and regulations, administrative supervision, self-regulation, technical protection, public supervision and social education.”

In their 2012 research, Xu and Hu describe the Internet regulatory framework in China as being governed by “430 laws and regulations,” of which “383 (89.1%) were promulgated by national ministries, 17 (4%) were promulgated by State Council, 15 (3.5%) by [the] Supreme Court, 13 (3%) by the third parties, and 2 by NPC (National People’s Congress) and its standing committee.⁶³

In a section dedicated to freedom of speech, the White Paper claims: “Chinese citizens fully enjoy freedom of speech on the Internet.”⁶⁴ The White Paper adds that freedom of speech on the Internet is a constitutionally protected right, under the terms of Article 35, which also protects freedom of association.⁶⁵ Although not stated in the White Paper, Article 51 of the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law guarantees: “In dealing with special issues concerning the various nationalities within its area, autonomous agencies of an ethnic autonomous area must conduct full consultation with their representatives and respect their opinions.”⁶⁶

The role of the Internet as a vehicle for government accountability is also outlined in the White Paper in this paragraph of the section, *Guaranteeing Citizens’ Freedom of Speech on the Internet*:

⁶² Freedom House. (2013, October 3). *Freedom on the Net 2013*. Retrieved from http://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/FOTN%202013_Full%20Report_0.pdf.

⁶³ Hu, Yueming and Jing Xu. (2012, May 11). *The Nature and Characteristics of Internet Governance in China: A Content Analysis of 430 Chinese Laws and Regulations*. Peking University, China. Retrieved from <http://www.cmdconf.net/2012/makale/86.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Chinese Government. (2001, June 8). *The Internet in China*. Retrieved from http://english.gov.cn/2010-06/08/content_1622956_5.htm.

⁶⁵ Chinese Government. (Adopted 1982, December 4). *Constitution of the People’s Republic of China*. Retrieved from <http://english.people.com.cn/constitution/constitution.html>.

⁶⁶ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (Unknown). *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of the People’s Republic of China (Chinese and English Text)*. Retrieved from <http://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/regional-ethnic-autonomy-law-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-amended>.

The Internet's role in supervision is given full play. The Chinese government has actively created conditions for the people to supervise the government, and attaches great importance to the Internet's role in supervision.⁶⁷

Despite, the stress placed on the privacy of Internet users in China in Section Four of the White Paper, Section Five, *Protecting Internet Security*, begins to delineate the actual limits imposed on Internet users by the Chinese government. "Citizens of the People's Republic of China and foreign citizens, legal persons and other organizations... must obey the laws and regulations of China and conscientiously protect Internet security."⁶⁸ The document then lists a number of Internet crimes including, "endangering state security, divulging state secrets, subverting state power and jeopardizing national unification; damaging state honor and interests; instigating ethnic hatred or discrimination and jeopardizing ethnic unity; jeopardizing state religious policy, propagating heretical or superstitious ideas; spreading rumors, disrupting social order and stability."⁶⁹

An online freedom advocacy group, the OpenNet Initiative, describes China's regulatory framework governing the Internet as "extraordinarily complex." The OpenNet Initiative recognizes a pattern in Chinese Internet law that tends to "overlap and restate prior provisions." Furthermore, the OpenNet Initiative details how this legal maze leads to inevitable confusion among Internet users as to permissible conduct, especially compounded "by the broad, sweeping definitions that many regulations employ."⁷⁰

The OpenNet Initiative adds that regulations cover an array of Internet activity including, general media, internet access, ISPs (Internet Service Providers), ICPs (Internet Cache Protocols), subscribers, cybercafés, content regulation (including internet users, content providers, state secrets controls, news and content control for cybercafés), as well as extralegal controls placed on the Internet such as self-censorship, pledges of "good conduct" and reports of alleged violations submitted by fellow users.⁷¹

According to the OpenNet Initiative "China's legal controls over the Internet have expanded greatly since 2000."⁷² Scholar Anne S.Y. Cheung wrote in 2006: "In 2000 alone six major regulations on Internet content control were promulgated by the National People's Congress, the State Council, and the Ministry of Information Industry, not including the various decrees that were announced by other ministerial unites and regulations that were passed by provincial governments. This wave of legislation on

⁶⁷ Chinese Government. (2001, June 8). *The Internet in China*. Retrieved from http://english.gov.cn/2010-06/08/content_1622956_5.htm.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ OpenNet Initiative. (2005, April 14). *Internet Filtering in China in 2004-2005: A Country Study*. Retrieved from <https://opennet.net/studies/china#toc2c>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

content regulation continued into 2002.”⁷³ According to one scholar, between 1994 and 2005, “more than 50 internet laws and regulations were issued in China.”⁷⁴

The laws and regulations passed in the 1994 to 2005 period illustrate the iterative and unclear qualities of China’s legal framework governing the Internet, especially regarding state security and ethnic issues. Article 24 of the Regulations on the Protection of Computer Information System Security of the People’s Republic of China (1994);⁷⁵ Article 5 of the Measures on the Administration of Security Protection of the International Networking of Computer Information Networks (1997);⁷⁶ Article 4 of the Measures on the Administration of Security Protection of the International Networking of Computer Information Networks (1997);⁷⁷ Article 2 of the Decision of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee on Guarding Internet Security (2000);⁷⁸ Article 6 of the Regulations on Telecommunications of the People’s Republic of China (2000);⁷⁹ Articles 1 and 8 of the Provisions on the Administration of Electronic Bulletin Services via the Internet (2000);⁸⁰ Article 15 of the Measures on the Administration of Internet Information Services (2000);⁸¹ Article 15 of the Measures for Managing Internet

⁷³ Cheung, Anne S.Y. (2006, November 7). *The Business of Governance: China’s Legislation on Content Regulation in Cyberspace*. Journal of International Law and Politics, New York University. Retrieved from http://nyujilp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/38.1_2-Cheung.pdf.

⁷⁴ Ai, Lijiao. (2013). *The impact of government regulation to the Chinese social networking systems (SNS) users in China*. Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand. Retrieved from [http://unitec.researchbank.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10652/2336/Lijiao%20Ai\(Elle\)_2013-06-20.pdf](http://unitec.researchbank.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10652/2336/Lijiao%20Ai(Elle)_2013-06-20.pdf).

⁷⁵ Asian LII. (Unknown). *Regulations for the Safety Protection of Computer Information Systems*. Retrieved from <http://www.asianlii.org/cn/legis/cen/laws/rfspocis719/>.

⁷⁶ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (1997, December 30). *Measures for the Administration of Security Protection of Computer Information Networks with International Interconnections (Chinese Text and CECC Partial Translation)*. Retrieved from <http://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/measures-for-the-administration-of-security-protection-of-computer>.

⁷⁷ World Intellectual Property Organization. (Unknown). *Measures for Security Protection Administration of the International Networking of Computer Information Networks*. Retrieved from http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=182465.

⁷⁸ China Copyright and Media. (Unknown). *National People’s Congress Standing Committee Decision Concerning Safeguarding Internet Safety*. Retrieved from <http://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2000/12/28/national-people%E2%80%99s-congress-standing-committee-decision-concerning-safeguarding-internet-safety/>.

⁷⁹ Chinese Government. (2010, January 20). *Telecommunications Regulations of the People’s Republic of China*. Retrieved from http://www.china.org.cn/business/laws_regulations/2010-01/20/content_19273945.htm.

⁸⁰ Chinese Government. (2010, January 20). *Administrative Provisions for Electronic Bulletin Services on the Internet*. Retrieved from http://www.china.org.cn/business/2010-01/20/content_19274960.htm.

⁸¹ Congressional-Executive Commission on China.. (2000, September 25). *Measures for the Administration of Internet Information Services (Chinese Text and CECC Partial Translation)*. Retrieved from <http://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/measures-for-the-administration-of-internet-information-services-cecc>.

Information Services (2000);⁸² Article 17 of the Interim Administrative Provisions on Internet Publishing (2002);⁸³ and Article 19 of the Provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information Services (2005)⁸⁴ all contain vaguely defined measures punishing online activity deemed to endanger state security and/or disrupt ethnic unity. Beyond 2005, legal instruments such as the Provisions on the Administration of Internet Audio and Video Programming Services continued proscriptions on online activity that “endangers national unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity; divulges state secrets, endangers state security or harms national honor and interests; incites ethnic hatred or discrimination [and] harms ethnic solidarity.”⁸⁵

The White Paper adds that provisions in China’s legal system outside of measures specifically aimed at the Internet can be exercised to prosecute individuals for their online activity. Laws cited by the document include: the Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China, General Principles of the Civil Law of the People’s Republic of China and the, Law of the People’s Republic of China on Punishments in Public Order and Security Administration. Furthermore, provisions of the Guarding State Secrets Law are applicable in cases involving individuals in their use of the Internet.⁸⁶

The building of a regulatory foundation governing China’s Internet in the early 2000s received an added ideological boost from late 2012 when Chinese officials consciously moved to curb what was increasingly becoming a dangerous counter-tool to government power. By the time of a November 28, 2013 Reuters article, a vice minister of the State Internet Information Office, Ren Xianliang claimed that in response to a campaign targeting “online rumors:” “The Internet has become clean.” Ren also “emphasized China’s commitment to scrubbing the web of content it deemed critical or offensive.”⁸⁷

On December 28, 2012, the *New York Times* reported on new rules governing real name registration with online service providers, as well as heightened pressure on companies to

⁸² Lehman, Lee & Xu. (Unknown). *Measures for Managing Internet Information Services – 2000*. Retrieved from <http://www.lehmanlaw.com/resource-centre/laws-and-regulations/information-technology/measures-for-managing-internet-information-services-2000.html>.

⁸³ Chinese Government. (2010, January 20). *Interim Administrative Provisions on Internet Publishing*. Retrieved from http://www.china.org.cn/business/2010-01/20/content_19275637.htm.

⁸⁴ Congressional-Executive Commission on China.. (2005, September 25). *Provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information Services (Chinese Text and CECC Full Translation)*. Retrieved from <http://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/provisions-on-the-administration-of-internet-news-information-services>.

⁸⁵ OpenNet Initiative. (Unknown). *China’s Provisions on the Administration of Internet Audio and Video Programming Services*. Retrieved from <https://opennet.net/news/china-provisions>.

⁸⁶ Asian LII. (Unknown). *Guarding State Secrets Law*. Retrieved from <http://www.asianlii.org/cn/legis/cen/laws/gssl248/>.

⁸⁷ Rajagopalan, Megha. (2013, November 28). *China’s rumor crackdown has ‘cleaned’ Internet, official says*. Reuters. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/28/us-china-internet-idUSBRE9AR0BQ20131128>.

delete outlawed content and reporting the user concerned.⁸⁸ Fears that the move could lead to increased self-censorship were voiced by Chinese writer, Murong Xuecun who told AP: “Their intention is very clear: It is to take back that bit of space for public opinion, that freedom of speech hundreds of millions of Chinese Internet users have strived for.”⁸⁹

Before the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress issued the national real name registration regulations, the measure was implemented in Beijing in December 2011.⁹⁰ On January 21, 2014, Reuters reported new rules that strengthened existing real name registration regulation with the requirement that Internet users register real names in order to upload videos to video hosting websites. Reuters describes how such websites “are often a lodestone for comment and critique on social issues in China, with users uploading videos documenting corruption, injustice and abuse carried out by government officials and authorities.”⁹¹

Demonstrating this further, a May 2013 internal document issued by the Central Committee General Office of the Chinese Communist Party entitled *Concerning the Situation in the Ideological Sphere* detailed Chinese officials’ anxieties over the party’s capacity to control public debate in China.⁹² In an article dated May 16, 2013, *Global Voices* described how an existing policy of “Seven-Speak-Nots” had been incorporated into the May document to censor online expression. Citing a professor at the East China University of Political Science and Law, the *Global Voices* report states the “Seven-Speak-Nots” include “universal values, civil society, citizen rights, judicial independence, freedom of the press, past mistakes of the communist party, and the privileged capitalist class.”⁹³ On May 14, 2013, Associated Press reported on the closing of microblog accounts owned by Chinese human rights lawyers and intellectuals stemming from the new directives.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Bradsher, Keith. (2012, December 28). *China Toughens Its Restrictions on Use of the Internet*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/29/world/asia/china-toughens-restrictions-on-internet-use.html>.

⁸⁹ McDonald, Joe. (2012, December 28). *China Real-Name Registration Is Now Law In Country*. Huffington Post. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/28/china-real-name-registration_n_2373808.html.

⁹⁰ Green, Nathan. (2013, January 2). *Real name Registration: Is the last free space on China’s Internet disappearing?* PandoDaily. Retrieved from <http://pando.com/2013/01/02/real-name-registration-is-the-last-free-space-on-chinas-internet-disappearing/>.

⁹¹ Carsten, Paul. (2014, January 21). *China orders real name register for online video uploads*. Reuters. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/21/us-china-internet-idUSBREA0K04T20140121>.

⁹² Buckley, Chris. (2013, May 13). *China Warns Officials Against ‘Dangerous’ Western Values*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/14/world/asia/chinese-leaders-warn-of-dangerous-western-values.html>.

⁹³ Lam, Oiwan. (2013, May 16). *Chinese Government Bans Seven ‘Speak-Not’ Subjects*. Global Voices. Retrieved from <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/05/16/chinese-government-bans-seven-speak-not-school-subjects/>.

⁹⁴ Tang, Didi and Wong, Gillian. (2013, May 14). *China tightens grip on discourse, ideology*. Yahoo! News. Retrieved from <http://news.yahoo.com/china-tightens-grip-discourse-ideology-095441403.html>.

In September 2013, the *Guardian* described further measures enacted by the Chinese authorities against spreading “irresponsible rumours.” The *Guardian* article further states that: “According to a judicial interpretation issued by China's top court and prosecutor, people will be charged with defamation if online rumours they create are visited by 5,000 internet users or reposted more than 500 times.” Offenders could receive prison terms of three years if found guilty. Beijing based blogger, Michael Anti told the *Guardian*: “This gives every corrupt local official a convenient tool to arrest anyone who criticises him”



Chinese border security force play video games in Kashgar. © People's Daily Online, February 26, 2014.

East Turkestan

Approaches to Internet governance in East Turkestan are not only managed through a regional regulatory system, but also influenced by statements made by leading party officials. The prevailing approach to Internet governance, whether through regional laws or policy statements, views the Internet and Internet users, especially Uyghurs, in East Turkestan with a high degree of suspicion and mistrust. Frequently, laws and statements have targeted Uyghur freedom of speech and association online given that officials fear open opposition to its policies in the region.

In order to suppress offline freedoms of expression and association, the Chinese government has often conflated peaceful dissent with “terrorism” or “splittism” which endanger state security. Peaceful online peaceful dissent is similarly dealt with and the government has targeted Uyghurs for their Internet activity and charged them with crimes

that compromise national security. As far back as 2002, state sources in East Turkestan “made clear that the ‘struggle against separatism’ is wide-ranging and encompasses repressing all potential dissent and opposition activities, including the peaceful expression of views via poems, songs, books, pamphlets, letters, or the Internet.”⁹⁵

The security narrative that gained prominence after the events in Urumchi in 2009 dominates the policy rhetoric and regulation affecting the Internet in East Turkestan. The government blamed the Internet for sparking the unrest in the regional capital and targeted members of the Uyghur community as instigators of the violence. In addition to meting out heavy punishments to those Uyghurs who provided Internet services, regional officials also moved to strengthen regulations governing the Internet in order to maintain control over the local narrative.⁹⁶

While the Internet was still largely inaccessible during an unprecedented shutdown in the region, Chinese officials put into effect the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Informatization Promotion Regulation on December 1, 2009. Article 40 explains the types of activity prohibited by the regulation:

(1) endanger state security or harm national and social interests; (2) destroy ethnic unity, incite ethnic separatism, or endanger social stability; (3) endanger the safety of the Internet and information systems; (4) violate intellectual property rights, trade secrets, or the lawful rights and interests of individual privacy, citizens, corporations, or other groups; (5) furnish, produce, or disseminate false or harmful information; (6) produce or disseminate information that is obscene, pornographic, violent, terrorist, homicidal, or that instigates crime; and (7) carry out other acts prohibited in laws and regulations.⁹⁷

The Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) clarifies that if individuals’ online behavior is in breach of these regulations, national laws should be used to prosecute them. The CECC also states that Article 34 of the regulation: “requires Internet service providers and related administrators to ‘establish and perfect’ an ‘inspection and control’ system for Internet security,” with “possible criminal responsibility” a consequence of breaches of Article 34.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Amnesty International. *People’s Republic of China: China’s Anti-Terrorism Legislation and Repression in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region*. Amnesty International Publications. Retrieved from <http://docs.uyghuramerican.org/AI-Antiterrorism.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Associated Press. (2009, July 8). *Internet plays key role in China’s latest unrest*. Caller.com. Retrieved from <http://www.caller.com/news/2009/jul/08/internet-plays-key-role-chinas-latest-unrest/?print=1>.

⁹⁷ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2008, December 8). *Xinjiang Government Issues Internet Regulation, Keeps Strict Controls on Information*. Retrieved from <http://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/xinjiang-government-issues-internet-regulation-keeps-strict>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

The regulation came into existence just two months after the Chinese state media reported the passing of a regulation in the region “prohibiting the instigation of ethnic separatist activities via the Internet.” The article added that according to the regulation: “Online activities compromising national security, damaging national and social interests, undermining ethnic unity, instigating ethnic secession and harming social stability will be severely punished.”⁹⁹

A *China Daily* article dated May 20, 2010 (just six days after the “full restoration” of the Internet), published an interview with Yang Maofa, director of the Xinjiang Communications Administration.¹⁰⁰ Yang’s comments illustrate the manner in which Chinese officials in East Turkestan conflate dissent with terrorism. In the interview, Yan states that: “The July 5 riot last year shows the Internet has become a major platform for the ‘three evil forces’ - extremists, separatists and terrorists - to spread rumors and plot sabotage activities...So reinforcing the management of Xinjiang's Internet is extremely important for national security.”¹⁰¹

In an illustration of curbs imposed at the local level in East Turkestan, the Kashgar Prefecture government issued a notice on March 10, 2010 intending to “crack down” on alleged criminal activities carried out using the Internet and mobile phones. The notice is remarkable for going beyond usual measures protecting state security and ethnic unity as seen in national regulations and lists the prohibition of activities that “advocate jihad” and “separatism,” a provision not generally articulated at the national level. The notice also describes the various curbs that have been placed on the ability to use the Internet to assemble and distribute information through a variety of online platforms.¹⁰²

The notice also places significant limitations on materials “inciting ethnic hatred” that is spread online and via mobile phones. The crime of “inciting ethnic hatred” also extends to content that includes very broadly defined “illegal” teachings of the Koran and religious preaching. These restrictions significantly curtail the Uyghur community’s right to express and practice their religious beliefs and contravene numerous international human rights legal protections that govern religious freedom.

According to provisions of the Criminal Law, the notice adds that those found guilty of “serious cases of inciting ethnic hatred” face up to ten years of imprisonment.

⁹⁹ Chinese Government. (2009, September 28). *Separatist acts on Web banned in Xinjiang*. Retrieved from http://www.china.org.cn/china/2009-09/28/content_18616294.htm.

¹⁰⁰ China Daily (2010, May 5). *Security of Internet, phone top priority in Xinjiang*. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-05/20/content_9870467.htm.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² 新疆喀什政府信息网 [Kashgar Government Information Web]. (2010, March 10). *关于依法严厉打击利用互联网、手机等进行犯罪活动的通告* [Notice of Law to Crackdown on the Use of the Internet and Mobile Phones to Carry Out Criminal Activities]. Retrieved from <http://chinese.uhrp.org/article/852329492>.

Religious expression is further targeted in the fifth provision detailed in the notice, which punishes “setting up websites, launching blogs, posting blogs, creating discussion forums or using mobile phone texting messages to illegally publicize and spread religion.”¹⁰³

An April 16, 2014 notice posted on the Shayar County, Aksu Prefecture government website details how informants could receive a reward for reporting on local residents exhibiting one or more of 53 proscribed behaviors.¹⁰⁴ Given that Uyghurs comprise 83% of Shayar’s population, the notice appeared to be targeted at Uyghurs in the county. Informants could be rewarded with payments of 50 Yuan to 50,000 Yuan (\$8 USD to \$8,000 USD) for notifying authorities of suspicious behaviors that included particular behaviors on the Internet usage. The notice exhorts residents to:

Report clues about actions to use the internet to produce, extract, reproduce, post, or publish audio, video, pictures, or text which includes content that incites national separatism, ethnic hatred or discrimination, and furthermore about the actions of their dissemination; and to report clues about actions to illegally publish, print, reproduce, sell or disseminate books or audio recordings that contain separatist content.¹⁰⁵

The Shayar County notice also offers 50 Yuan to 500 Yuan (\$8 USD to \$80 USD) for “[d]iscovering someone watching a reactionary DVD, or downloaded reactionary videos on mobile phones or computers.”¹⁰⁶

Regulation governing Internet cafés may be traced back to 1998 with the *Notice on the operation of net bars and on strengthening operations security*, which included the need for businesses to maintain a “comprehensive management system for security, and full-time or part-time personnel for security management.” The measures were further refined with the introduction of the *Measures on the Administration of Business Sites of Internet Access Services* in which the role of the Public Security Bureau (PSB) in Internet security was clarified. While maintaining the authority to conduct “security inspections,” Internet café owners “were not only explicitly prohibited from making use of their businesses sites to produce, replicate, review, publish and transmit...forbidden content, they were also tasked with stopping their patron’s behavior.” This provision was consistent with the liabilities placed on website owners regarding content on their websites. The PSB were given the power to prosecute any proprietors not following the new measures. The 2002 *Regulations on the Administration of Business Sites Providing Internet Services* prohibited the entrance of minors onto the premises.¹⁰⁷ A July 26, 2013 report in The

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Uyghur Human Rights Project. (2014, May 8). *China attempts to criminalize every aspect of Uyghur religious belief and practice*. Retrieved from http://docs.uyghuramerican.org/5-8-14_Briefing-Religious_Restrictions.pdf.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Herold, David Kurt and Marolt, Peter. *Online Society in China*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013). p.41.

Diplomat records how chains own 40% of Internet cafés in China instead of single owner locations. The shift is due to a state initiative “to consolidate this industry in order to increase the efficiency of censorship and surveillance.”¹⁰⁸

The OpenNet Initiative notes that: “All cafés are required to install software that blocks Web sites purportedly containing pornographic or ‘subversive’ content. Cafés must keep detailed logs linking users to the pages they visited and recording access to any blocked pages; these records are reported to the Public Security Bureau. Cafés must obtain and record users' identities by asking for their identification cards, and must keep these records for at least 60 days.”¹⁰⁹

The real name registration requirement at Internet cafés in East Turkestan was reported in a May 20, 2010 *China Daily* article, just days after the Internet’s “full restoration” that followed a 10 month shutdown.¹¹⁰ Several Uyghurs interviewed by UHRP confirmed the requirement of showing one’s ID before accessing computers at Internet cafés.¹¹¹ Several interviewees also corroborated the enforcement of regulations preventing minors from accessing Internet cafés.¹¹² Two respondents described how prohibitions were explicitly made in Internet cafés on “sensitive” material, such as politics and religion.¹¹³ One of the two interviewees stressed that due to excessive surveillance in Internet cafés, “before making any kind of footprint online, you have to think if what you post is legal or not.”¹¹⁴ Interviewees 4 and 6 described the prevalence of security cameras in Internet cafés in the region.¹¹⁵ A Radio Free Asia report dated February 6, 2009 described tensions in an Internet café in Aksu Prefecture that were caused by heavy-handed guards on site. This suggests that security measures are being implemented that target specific ethnic groups over others.¹¹⁶

On April 30, 2013, Radio Free Asia reported on new regulations in East Turkestan that required cell phones users to register real names and provide IDs when buying a SIM card. According to the report, the regulation was “a directive sent down from the

¹⁰⁸ Watts, Elleka. (2013, July 26). *The Decline of China’s Internet Cafés*. The Diplomat. Retrieved from <http://thediplomat.com/2013/07/the-decline-of-chinas-internet-cafes/>.

¹⁰⁹ OpenNet Initiative. (2005, April 14). *Internet Filtering in China in 2004-2005: A Country Study*. Retrieved from <https://opennet.net/studies/china#toc2c>.

¹¹⁰ China Daily (2010, May 5). *Security of Internet, phone top priority in Xinjiang*. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-05/20/content_9870467.htm.

¹¹¹ Interviewees 2, 3 and 4 interviews with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

¹¹² Interviewees 2, 3, 4 and 10 interviews with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013. Interviewee 13 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2014.

¹¹³ Interviewee 4 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013. Interviewee 13 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2014.

¹¹⁴ Interviewee 13 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2014.

¹¹⁵ Interviewees 4 and 6 interviews with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

¹¹⁶ Lipes, Joshua. (2009, February 6). *Ethnic Tensions in Xinjiang’s Internet Cafes*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/xinjianginternetcafe-02062009150519.html>.

communications bureau of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region government.” Radio Free Asia added the measure was a follow up to a similar 2010 initiative that was widely disregarded.¹¹⁷ Real name registration was also required when using a new Uyghur microblogging service that was launched in 2012.¹¹⁸

Regulation and public statements by senior officials regarding the Internet increasingly discuss “terrorist activity” online without adequately distinguishing between militant activity and non-violent dissent. In the absence of a clear delineation, Chinese officials create an Internet environment in East Turkestan that overly self-regulates to the extent that state rhetoric over the Internet as a citizen tool for government accountability appears at the very least disingenuous.

At a meeting during the 2014 National People’s Congress, Xinjiang party secretary, Zhang Chunxian told attendees that: “90 percent of violent terrorists use means such as VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) to circumvent the Great Firewall.” Although Zhang did not make clear how he had arrived at this figure, he claimed a recent crackdown in the region “targets terrorists instead of ordinary citizens;” however, Zhang did not clarify the difference between the two groups of people. The party secretary’s comments came three months after foreign ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying told media, “that online posting has become one of the major and direct causes for the growing number of terrorist attacks in China.”¹¹⁹

A *Global Times* article dated March 31, 2014 entitled *Xinjiang bans terror video, audio* further demonstrated China’s hardening rhetorical approach to Internet policy in East Turkestan. The report described how a new “notice targets audio and video that include materials advocating violence and terrorism, religious extremism and separation of ethnic groups. The authorities forbid using cellphones, computers and mobile storage devices to make, send, play, copy, transfer or save the audio and video.”¹²⁰

In an interview conducted by UHRP researchers in 2013, one young Uyghur stated that, “I resent all the restrictions on the Internet. You have no freedom in China and you can’t write anything—it’s unbelievable. My generation wants to know more about the world; however, all these rules are very confusing.”¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Mudie, Luisetta. (2013, April 30). *Xinjiang Cell Phone Users Force to Register With Real Names*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/register-04302013134824.html>.

¹¹⁸ Internet Society of China. (2012, March 5). *Web China: China’s Uyghurs tweet in mother tongue*. Retrieved from <http://www.isc.org.cn/english/Focus/listinfo-19253.html>.

¹¹⁹ Jingjing Xuyang. (2014, March 7). *Terrorist attacks ‘part of trend’*. *Global Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/846775.shtml>.

¹²⁰ Wang Yiqiong. (2014, March 31). *Xinjiang bans terror video, audio*. *Global Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/851921.shtml>.

¹²¹ Interviewee 7 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

V. Ten Month Internet Shutdown

Around midnight on July 6, 2009, less than 24 hours after the outbreak of deadly unrest in Urumchi, most Internet providers discontinued service in East Turkestan.¹²² “Chinese authorities had the technological capability to stop residents of one of China’s provinces from accessing the Internet,” and a ten-month shutdown of the Internet across the entire region followed.¹²³ The Internet shutdown was part of a communications blackout that also included overseas telephone calls and cell phone text messaging. The length of the Internet shutdown is unprecedented worldwide. Although other governments have enacted Internet closures, the one occurring in East Turkestan is unparalleled. Chinese “[o]fficials justified the Internet blocks as safety precautions, claiming, ‘We cut Internet connection in some areas of Urumchi in order to quench the riot quickly and prevent violence from spreading to other places.’”¹²⁴

Accounts from a number of sources described retaliatory state measures targeting Uyghurs in the post-July 5, 2009 unrest period that amounted to a systematic violation of the Uyghur community’s human rights. Indiscriminate mass arrests in Uyghur neighborhoods,¹²⁵ torture in detention,¹²⁶ judicial procedures falling far below international standards¹²⁷ and enforced disappearances¹²⁸ are some of the documented rights violations that took place during the 10 month communications blackout, which one Uyghur who spoke to UHRP described as “a period of darkness.”¹²⁹ During the period of the shutdown overseas media access to East Turkestan was severely curtailed: “They were forbidden from reporting on the aftermath of the incidents, including the widespread and systematic interrogations and arrests of Uighurs, as well as the unexplained disappearance of dozens of detained suspects.”¹³⁰

¹²² Lam, Oiwan. (2010, October 13). *China: When the network was cut in Xinjiang....* Global Voices. Retrieved from <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2010/10/13/china-when-network-was-cut-in-xinjiang/>.

¹²³ Herold, David Kurt and Marolt, Peter. *Online Society in China*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

¹²⁴ OpenNet Initiative (2012, August 9). *Country Profiles: China*. Retrieved from <https://opennet.net/research/profiles/china>.

¹²⁵ Associated Press. (2009, July 7). *Ethnic unrest in China leads to mass arrests*. CNN. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/07/06/china.uyghur.protest/index.html?iref=topnews>.

¹²⁶ Uyghur Human Rights Project. (2009). *To Strike The Strongest Blow: Questions Remain Over Crackdown On 2009 Unrest In Urumchi*. Uyghur Human Rights Project, Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://docs.uyghuramerican.org/to-strike-the-strongest-blow.pdf>.

¹²⁷ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2009, November 30). *Authorities Execute 9 After Trials in Xinjiang Marked by Due Process Violations*. Retrieved from <http://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/authorities-execute-9-after-trials-in-xinjiang-marked-by-due>.

¹²⁸ Human Rights Watch. (2009, October 21). “We Are Afraid to Even Look for Them.” Retrieved from <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/10/22/we-are-afraid-even-look-them>.

¹²⁹ Interviewee 3 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

¹³⁰ OpenNet Initiative (2012, August 9). *Country Profiles: China*. Retrieved from <https://opennet.net/research/profiles/china>.



Security forces gather in People's Square, Urumqi, July 6, 2009 © The Guardian/Dan Chung

The shutdown of communications across the region played a critical role in preventing the surfacing of a non-state account of the July 5, 2009 unrest. The predominance of state accounts is starkly demonstrated in the frequently cited number of 197 unrest-related deaths by overseas media.¹³¹ The origin of this statistic is the Chinese state media and UHRP acknowledges that a number of journalists do qualify this figure in their reports. Speaking to Uyghur refugees post July 5, Amnesty International¹³² and UHRP¹³³ documented eyewitness accounts detailing the use of state violence against Uyghurs peacefully exercising their rights to assembly, association and speech during the July 5, 2009 protest that indicate the death toll may have been higher than 197.

The Chinese authorities' denial of the emergence and dissemination online of non-state accounts accessible in East Turkestan regarding serious civil disturbances is a violation of

¹³¹ Branigan, Tania. (2009, July 31). *Trials over riots that left 197 dead in Urumqi to begin soon*. The Guardian. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/31/china-urumqi-riot-trials>.

¹³² Amnesty International. (2010). *“Justice, Justice”: The July 2009 Protests in Xinjiang, China*. Retrieved from <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA17/027/2010/en>.

¹³³ Uyghur Human Rights Project. (2009). *Can Anyone Hear Us? Voices From The 2009 Unrest In Urumchi*. Retrieved from <http://docs.uyghuramerican.org/Can-Anyone-Hear-Us.pdf>.

international standards of behavior during periods of unrest.¹³⁴ The Chinese government's move to suppress non-state accounts of unrest in East Turkestan has negative implications for inter-communal reconciliation and state accountability to its citizens.

Uyghur Accounts of the Internet Shutdown

In interviews given to UHRP researchers, a number of Uyghurs spoke about the personal and social effects of the government's communications blackout in East Turkestan. While emphasis was placed on the inability to connect with relatives overseas, a number of interviewees spoke of the feeling of being disconnected from the outside world and bombarded by Chinese government propaganda regarding the events of July 5, 2009. As a result, some interviewees expressed the sentiment that they, and by extension the Uyghur people, were made to feel responsible for the Internet shutdown by the misinformation promoted by Chinese state media. Other interviewees speculated that the shutdown was convenient to the hiding of widespread human rights abuses conducted in the post July 5 period.

Interviewee 13 told UHRP that no one he knew expected that the government would take such a drastic action such as shutting down communications for ten months. However, he added: "Many bad things happened during that time. Uyghurs were arrested and killed and the government wanted to hide these human rights abuses. The shutdown helped the government control the situation and the news, especially in the south. People there did not exactly know what had happened on July 5 because the only information they received was from the Chinese media."¹³⁵

Interviewee 17, a Uyghur intellectual active online, echoed a number of these points and called the Internet shutdown "a dark period of modern Uyghur history."¹³⁶ Interviewee 17 added that the shutdown allowed the government to control the narrative of the unrest. "There was a lot of information about what happened, which is difficult to control. That this information was related to the actions of the Chinese government and about what they were doing in East Turkestan meant officials had to do something severe."¹³⁷

He added that the invitation extended to the international media to come to Urumchi to report on the unrest by Chinese officials was merely an opportunity for the government to show the overseas media a particular version of the unrest. He added that the journalists who did come to Urumchi at the time most likely did not speak Uyghur and Uyghurs who knew details of the unrest contradicting the state narrative were not interviewed. "Once all the journalists went back to Beijing, the arrests and killings started in earnest," he said.

¹³⁴ United Nations General Assembly. (2011, August 10). *Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression*. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/A.66.290.pdf>.

¹³⁵ Interviewee 13 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2014.

¹³⁶ Interviewee 17 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2014.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

“With the Internet blackout in force and with no further invitation extended to the international media during those months, the government was able to close the region off to the world. Before July 5, no overseas journalist was allowed to be based in Urumchi, so why would the Chinese government all of sudden become transparent?”¹³⁸

The Uyghur intellectual interviewed by UHRP also remarked that another effect of the unrest was to ensure the continuing estrangement between the Uyghur and Chinese communities. “Uyghurs learn much of what they know about the Chinese through the Internet, so the shutdown closed off that source of information as we tend to live with other Uyghurs.”¹³⁹

A number of interviewees discussed the difficulty experienced in communicating with relatives overseas and the convoluted measures required to circumvent the restrictions placed on international calls.¹⁴⁰ Others talked about the loss of income incurred by their parents’ or their own businesses because of the inability to smoothly communicate with business associates during the communications shutdown.¹⁴¹ There is no available figure on the cost to the regional economy due to the Internet shutdown.

Interviewees often discussed the feeling of being “disconnected from the world.”¹⁴² Interviewee 8 said: “You just didn’t know what was happening in the outside world because all the TV was propaganda about ‘ethnic unity’ and we had lost the Uyghur websites we used to get our information. I must have heard the national anthem more times than ever during those months.”¹⁴³ Interviewee 6 called the programs on state TV regarding the unrest, “ridiculous.”¹⁴⁴ While Interviewee 9 said the content of TV programs about the July 5 unrest she had watched in China did not contain the same images she saw on video hosting websites overseas. “I saw the beating of Uyghurs by Chinese people and by the police. We didn’t see this in China.”¹⁴⁵

The absence of the Internet could also lead to the rapid spread of rumors in contrast to government assertions that the Internet promoted “spreading rumors.” In a 2013 report titled *Rumors, Suspicion and Hysteria*, UHRP documented the rapid spread of a September 2009 rumor in Urumchi alleging Uyghurs were carrying out a spate of pinprick attacks across the city. The perpetrators of the attacks were supposedly transmitting infectious and fatal diseases through syringes and hysteria among residents

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Interviewees 3, 4 and 10 interviews with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013. Interviewee 17 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2014.

¹⁴¹ Interviewees 4 and 10 interviews with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

¹⁴² Interviewees 7, 10 and 11 interviews with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013. Interviewees 13 and 17 interviews with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2014.

¹⁴³ Interviewee 8 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

¹⁴⁴ Interviewee 6 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

¹⁴⁵ Interviewee 9 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

in the city reached dangerous levels. While the veracity of the rumor was highly questionable, a series of self-initiated reprisal attacks on Uyghur residents by Han Chinese were reported.¹⁴⁶



Han protestors march in Urumqi after rumors of pinprick attacks by Uyghurs. 9/3/09 © Associated Press

Interviewee 10 expressed anger at the shutdown, but was fatalistic about opposing it. “The government had no right to shutdown the Internet content and cut us off from the world. There was no explanation as to why they did it. We just have to follow the government’s way. We cannot ask why.”¹⁴⁷ Despite his displeasure with the government, Interviewee 10 also felt culpability for the blackout: “Because of all the propaganda about the unrest, Han people accused Uyghurs of getting the Internet shutdown. I sometimes thought I was being punished for something bad I had done. It was as if I had to pay for something I didn’t know anything about.”¹⁴⁸

Interviewee 14 spoke about how since the shutdown Uyghurs did not think the Internet as a safe environment, regardless of the kind of content an individual posted, because it had become a place for gathering personal data to be later used. Interviewee 14 added the

¹⁴⁶ Uyghur Human Rights Project. (2013, September 18). *Rumors, Suspicion and Hysteria: Urumchi’s Han Residents Target Uyghurs in September 2009 Pinprick Attack Scare*. Retrieved from <http://uhrp.org/press-release/rumors-suspicion-and-hysteria-urumchis-han-residents-target-uyghurs-september-2009>.

¹⁴⁷ Interviewee 10 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

government had neglected the kind of information being exchanged prior to July 5 by Uyghurs online; however, this new self-censorship assisted state efforts to control Uyghur expression. An interviewee 14 concluded: “When I tell people in America about the 10 month Internet shutdown in East Turkestan, they do not believe it.”¹⁴⁹

Shutdown

Images and videos of the July 5 unrest were uploaded in number and rapidly onto sites such as Twitter, YouTube and Flickr, as well as Chinese sites including Fanfou and Youku.¹⁵⁰ AFP reporter, D’Arcy Doran described how state media “footage gave a different impression from that given by some of the clips on YouTube.” State censors moved quickly to delete pictures of the unrest on image sharing sites, including both those of peaceful demonstrations and of casualties of violence.¹⁵¹

News about the unrest in Urumchi was blocked to Internet users in other parts of China, as China-based search engines returned no results on related searches, such as “Urumchi.”¹⁵² Netizens wishing to comment on the unrest on online bulletin boards in eastern China were censored; for instance, comments on the unrest by visitors to the Shanghai-based website pchome.com were removed within several hours with their postings replaced by the line “This posting does not exist.”¹⁵³ One Internet user commented: “Chinese mainland websites repeatedly deleted my post, which seriously violated China’s law and violated my freedom and rights. I hereby want to express my strong disgust and condemnation.”

On the evening of July 5, the Internet was shutdown.¹⁵⁴ In an article dated October 13, 2010 Oiwan Lam writing in *Global Voices* summarized an article written by an East Turkestan-based netizen describing the advent of the shutdown and the subsequent months.

Beginning from July 6 midnight, Internet service providers stopped functioning. Chinanet was blocked, followed by China mobile, China Unicom and CERNET. CSTNET was blocked on July 9. Mobile online access was blocked around the

¹⁴⁹ Interviewee 14 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2014.

¹⁵⁰ Ward, Mark. (2009, July 6). “China clampdown on tech in Urumqi”. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8136944.stm>.

¹⁵¹ Doran, Darcy. (2009, July 6). *Savvy Internet users defy China’s censors on riot*. AFP. Retrieved from <http://archive.today/jmAt>.

¹⁵² Ward, Mark. (2009, July 6). “China clampdown on tech in Urumqi.” *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8136944.stm>.

¹⁵³ Blanchard, Ben. (2009, July 6). “China tightens Web screws after Xinjiang riot”. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/07/06/us-china-xinjiang-internet-sb-idUSTRE56513820090706>.

¹⁵⁴ Heacock, Rebekah. (2009, July 6). *China shuts down Internet in Xinjiang region after riots*. OpenNet Initiative, Retrieved from <https://opennet.net/blog/2009/07/china-shuts-down-internet-xinjiang-region-after-riots>; and Blanchard, Ben. (2009, July 6). “China tightens Web screws after Xinjiang riot”. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/07/06/us-china-xinjiang-internet-sb-idUSTRE56513820090706>.

same time but WAP access lasted until mid August. The only way you could get around the blocking is to use 56K dial up for accessing the Internet.¹⁵⁵

The netizen describes how the dial up option was blocked in December 2009 leaving Internet users with the options of purchasing an “[e]xpensive satellite connection,” or to “[I]eave Xinjiang.”¹⁵⁶ A number of businesspeople who needed the Internet to continue operations did the latter.¹⁵⁷ The Global Voices article adds however, “government institutes, such as the police and communication departments stay connected to the internet.”¹⁵⁸

Referring to the shutdown in East Turkestan, David Kurt Herold, co-author of *Online Society in China*, said: “Chinese authorities had the technological capability to stop residents of one of China’s provinces from accessing the Internet. It had the capability and power over private companies providing online services in China to create a ‘mini’ Internet for citizens of that province, and it had the political will to use them.”¹⁵⁹

Nationwide Twitter and YouTube were blocked after July 5,¹⁶⁰ with state media reports charging that “Xinjiang independence activists” were “harming China’s national interests” on these sites.¹⁶¹ A *People’s Daily* article alleged “separatist groups based overseas used social networking and blogging sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Tencent QQ, and MSN to contact rioters and orchestrate the [July 5] violence;”¹⁶² thereby, “necessitating greater restrictions on the Internet to avoid further collaboration between separatist forces.”¹⁶³

Speaking less than two weeks after the shutdown of the Internet in the region, Zhejiang University professor, Yu Xiaofeng told Chinese state media: “Blocking information should not be the first choice in an open society...The government should allow official

¹⁵⁵ Liam, Owian. (2010, October 13). China: *When the network was cut in Xinjiang...* Global Voices. Retrieved from <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2010/10/13/china-when-network-was-cut-in-xinjiang/>.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Grammaticas, Damien. (2010, February 11). *Trekking 1,000km in China for e-mail*. BBC. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8506601.stm>.

¹⁵⁸ Liam, Owian. (2010, October 13). China: *When the network was cut in Xinjiang...* Global Voices. Retrieved from <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2010/10/13/china-when-network-was-cut-in-xinjiang/>.

¹⁵⁹ Herold, David Kurt and Marolt, Peter. *Online Society in China*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁶⁰ Doran, Darcy. (2009, July 6). *Savvy Internet users defy China’s censors on riot*. AFP. Retrieved from <http://archive.today/jmAt>.

¹⁶¹ People’s Daily Online. (2009, July 10). *80 pct of netizens agree China should punish Facebook*. Retrieved from <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/6697993.html>.

¹⁶² China Daily. (2009, November 5). *The missing link*. Retrieved from <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/6804414.html>.

¹⁶³ OpenNet Initiative (2012, August 9). *Country Profiles: China*. Retrieved from <https://opennet.net/research/profiles/china>.

and unofficial sources so that both the government and the public can seek truth through knowledge.”¹⁶⁴

Partial restorations

Between December 2009 and May 2010, Chinese officials began the slow process of restoring access to the Internet. In preparation for a restoration of service, regional authorities enacted an “Information Promotion Bill,” which made discussion of “separatism” online a criminal offense.¹⁶⁵ In addition, the bill targeted Internet content deemed to undermine “national unity” or harm “social stability.”¹⁶⁶ Internet service providers are required to strengthen monitoring systems and report any users for transgressing the terms of the bill. Not only did this measure add an extra level of control, but it also put a considerable liability on private companies to report any possible offenses to avoid censure. Emails, as well as media sharing and online posts, or comments, were subject to the bill.¹⁶⁷

On December 28, 2009, access to state media outlets, Xinhua and People’s Daily Online were restored.¹⁶⁸ Followed by Sohu and Sina on January 10, 2010; however, according to an overseas resident access to these two sites was limited.¹⁶⁹ On January 19, 2010, Xinhua reported the resumption of “online banking, online securities trading, [and] online student enrollment.”¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Reporters Without Borders criticized the restoration in a press release dated January 29, 2010. “Despite claims by the Chinese authorities that restrictions on Internet services and communications are gradually being lifted in the northwestern region of Xinjiang, this is not the case.”¹⁷¹ Reporters Without Borders added that websites such as Diyarim and Xabnam among many others remained offline and criticized the Chinese government for “trying to give the impression that communications have been restored in Xinjiang.”¹⁷² The press release also stated that

¹⁶⁴ Chinese Government. (2009, July 16). *Urumqi longing to be reconnected to online world*. Retrieved from http://www.china.org.cn/china/xinjiang_unrest/2009-07/16/content_18146313.htm.

¹⁶⁵ AFP. (2009, September 28). *Xinjiang bans separatist discussions on the Internet*. Retrieved from <http://www.news.com.au/technology/xinjiang-bans-separatist-discussions-on-internet/story-e6frfo0-1225780354033>.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Fei Chang Dao. (2013, July 5). *Sina Weibo Commemorates Anniversary of Government’s Shutting Down Xinjiang’s Internet – With Censorship*. Retrieved from <http://blog.feichangdao.com/2013/07/sina-weibo-commemorates-anniversary-of.html>.

¹⁶⁹ Far West China. (2010, May 14). *Xinjiang Internet Restored after 10 Months*. Retrieved from <http://www.farwestchina.com/2010/05/xinjiang-internet-restored-after-10-months.html>.

¹⁷⁰ Xinhua. (2010, January 19). *Xinjiang to continue lifting communication restrictions: spokesperson*. Retrieved from http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-01/19/c_13141696.htm.

¹⁷¹ Reporters Without Borders. (2010, January 29). *Internet Still Not restored in Xinjiang*. Retrieved from <http://en.rsf.org/china-internet-still-not-restored-in-29-01-2010.36238.html>.

¹⁷² Ibid and Reporters Without Borders. (2009, October 29). *Survey of Blocked Uyghur Websites Shows Xinjiang Still Cut Off From the World*. Retrieved from <http://en.rsf.org/china-survey-of-blocked-uyghur-websites-29-10-2009.34859>.

other Internet users were being encouraged to report any fellow users for making an “unpatriotic comment.”¹⁷³

A *China Daily* article dated February 8, 2010 announced the partial return of 27 websites chosen “because all of them are very practical and popular in China.” A second article from *China Daily* published on February 10, 2010 described the return of email in the region; however, the service was limited to Sina.¹⁷⁴ On May 14, 2010 overseas media reported a “full” restoration of the Internet in East Turkestan.¹⁷⁵ On the same day, state media reported that the government had set up a phone and e-mail hotline for Internet users to report “harmful” Internet content.¹⁷⁶

Despite government claims that Internet users in the region were granted “full Internet access” as of May 14, East Turkestan’s netizens remained subject to the same limitations as netizens throughout China because of the “Great Firewall” put in place nationwide by the Chinese authorities. Behind the “Great Firewall,” Internet users are still unable to access such sites as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube without proxy servers. In addition, Uyghurs living in Urumchi reported that many popular Uyghur websites remained closed after May 14.¹⁷⁷ Section VII details how many of these websites were never restored after the shutdown.

A precedent for controlling counter state narratives

Freedom House described the 10-month shutdown of the Internet in East Turkestan as “astounding.”¹⁷⁸ In a report entitled *Throttling Dissent*, Freedom House described how since the July 5 unrest, Chinese authorities have “enforced smaller-scale shutdowns lasting several days or weeks.”¹⁷⁹ The report cites two 2012 examples in Tibet when an Internet blackout followed either an incident or preceded a sensitive commemoration. A *Global Voices* article dated December 17, 2013 describes Internet shutdowns in Tibet and

¹⁷³ Reporters Without Borders. (2010, January 29). *Internet Still Not restored in Xinjiang*. Retrieved from http://en.rsf.org/china-internet-still-not-restored-in-29-01-2010_36238.html.

¹⁷⁴ China Daily. (2010, February 10). *Across China: Xinjiang*. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-02/10/content_9454925.htm.

¹⁷⁵ Hogg, Charles. (2010, May 14). *China restores Xinjiang internet*. BBC News. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8682145.stm> and Wong, Edward. (2010, May 14). *After Long Ban, Western China Is Back Online*. New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/15/world/asia/15china.html>.

¹⁷⁶ Uyghur American Association. (2010, May 14). *Internet reopened in East Turkestan, but Uyghur webmasters and bloggers remain behind bars*. Retrieved from <http://uyghuramerican.org/article/internet-reopened-east-turkestan-uyghur-webmasters-and-bloggers-remain-behind-bars.html-0>.

¹⁷⁷ Mudie, Luisetta. (2010, May 19). *Xinjiang Online, Controls Remain*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/internet-05192010113601.html>.

¹⁷⁸ Earp, Madeline. (2013, July). *Throttling Dissent: China’s New Leaders Refine Internet Control*. Freedom House. Retrieved from <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/throttling-dissent-chinas-new-leaders-refine-internet-control>.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

East Turkestan as the “norm,”¹⁸⁰ and details two occasions when the Internet was cut in greater Tibet preceding the July 5 unrest; the first following unrest in Lhasa in March 2008 and the second in Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in February 2009.¹⁸¹

When incidents occurred in Pichan County in March 2013,¹⁸² Lukchun Township (also in Pichan County) in June 2013,¹⁸³ and Hanerik in June 2013¹⁸⁴ the Internet was cut in all of these locations. In the case of the Lukchun incident Internet access was also cut in Urumchi according to the Global Voices article.¹⁸⁵

Internet blackouts have proved an effective strategy for the Chinese authorities in containing information about the unrest that the measure has now been applied outside of ethnic minority areas. For example, unrest in Wukan, Guangdong in December 2011 was followed by an Internet shutdown in the area surrounding the village.¹⁸⁶ *Global Voices* also documented an instance in Shishou, Hubei in June 2009.¹⁸⁷

In an illustration of the effectiveness of Internet blackouts, repressive regimes across the globe have employed the tactic to suppress counter-state narratives and their dissemination. Since the ten-month Internet shutdown in East Turkestan, NGOs and the

¹⁸⁰ Lam, Oiwan. (2013, December 17). *In Tibet and Uyghur Regions, Internet Blackouts Are the Norm*. *Global Voices*. Retrieved from <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2013/12/17/in-chinas-ethnic-minority-regions-internet-blackouts-are-the-norm/>.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Lam, Oiwan. (2013, December 17). *In Tibet and Uyghur Regions, Internet Blackouts Are the Norm*. *Global Voices*. Retrieved from <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2013/12/17/in-chinas-ethnic-minority-regions-internet-blackouts-are-the-norm/> and Kamberi, Dolkun. (2013, April 9). *Uyghur Boy Hacked to Death in Xinjiang*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/boy-04092013190730.html>.

¹⁸³ Mudie, Luisetta. (2013, June 26). *27 Die in Fresh Xinjiang Violence*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/violence-06262013171600.html>; and Mudie, Luisetta. (2013, June 28). *Two Uyghurs Believed Killed in Hotan Violence*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/violence-06282013173938.html>.

¹⁸⁴ Jacobs, Andrew. (2013, August 26). *Over News of Clash, a Shroud of Silence in Xinjiang*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/27/world/asia/over-news-of-clash-a-shroud-of-silence-in-xinjiang.html> and Kitto, Mark. (2013, August 25). *Phantom enemies*. Prospect Magazine. Retrieved from <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/phantom-enemies-mark-kitto-hetian-xinjiang-uyghurs-china/>.

¹⁸⁵ Lam, Oiwan. (2013, December 17). *In Tibet and Uyghur Regions, Internet Blackouts Are the Norm*. *Global Voices*. Retrieved from <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2013/12/17/in-chinas-ethnic-minority-regions-internet-blackouts-are-the-norm/>.

¹⁸⁶ International Federation of Journalists. (2011, December 19). *Internet Shut Down and Foreign Journalists Expelled from Wukan*. IFJ Asia-Pacific. Retrieved from <http://asiapacific.ifj.org/en/articles/internet-shut-down-and-foreign-journalists-expelled-from-wukan>.

¹⁸⁷ Lam, Oiwan. (2013, December 17). *In Tibet and Uyghur Regions, Internet Blackouts Are the Norm*. *Global Voices*. Retrieved from <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2013/12/17/in-chinas-ethnic-minority-regions-internet-blackouts-are-the-norm/>.

media have reported shutdowns in Syria,¹⁸⁸ Iran,¹⁸⁹ Venezuela,¹⁹⁰ Egypt,¹⁹¹ Libya,¹⁹² and Sudan.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ Thompson, Nicholas. (2013, May 8). *Why Did Syria Shut Down the Internet?* The New Yorker. Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/comment/2013/05/why-did-syria-shut-down-the-internet.html>.

¹⁸⁹ Cooper, Charles. (2012, February 10). *Iran cuts off Internet access*. CNet. Retrieved from http://news.cnet.com/8301-13510_3-57374594-21/iran-cuts-off-internet-access/.

¹⁹⁰ Lopez, Virginia. (2014, February 22). *Venezuelans on streets again as protest leader awaits trial*. The Guardian. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/22/venezuelans-streets-protest-leader>.

¹⁹¹ Kelly, Sanja. (2011). *New Technologies, Innovative Repression: Growing Threats to Internet Freedom*. Freedom House. Retrieved from <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net-2011/new-technologies-innovative-repression-growing-threats-internet-freedom>.

¹⁹² Reporters Without Borders. (2011, March 4). *Journalists Confined to their Hotels, Internet Disconnected*. Retrieved from http://en.rsf.org/journalists-confined-to-their-04-03-2011_39681.html.

¹⁹³ Gibbs, Samuel. (2013, September 25). *Sudan Internet cut off as protests erupt against government in Khartoum*. The Guardian. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/sep/25/sudan-internet-cut-khartoum-protests>.

VI. Detentions

The Chinese government frequently imprisons Uyghur webmasters, bloggers, online journalists and Internet users in order to stifle dissent and silence opposition to its policies. High profile detentions and harsh sentencing also has the effect of preempting dissenting views online. There have been a number of documented individual cases that illustrate the Chinese authorities' determination to narrow the confines of online expression and association among Uyghurs. While overseas media, other human rights organizations and overseas governments have recorded many of these cases, UHRP spoke to Uyghurs who actually knew the individuals concerned in these publicized cases. UHRP research staff also documented firsthand accounts of how friends and relatives of interviewees had been harassed or detained for their online activity.

Pre July 5, 2009 detentions



Mehbube Ablesh, undated photo from an anonymous listener courtesy of Radio Free Asia.

Criminal charges waged against Uyghurs for their Internet use spiked post-July 5, especially in the immediate post unrest period. However, even before July 5, Uyghurs faced imprisonment for exercising freedom of speech online. Mehbube Ablesh was fired from her position with the Xinjiang People's Radio and subsequently arrested in 2008. A source told Radio Free Asia reporters Ablesh had primarily written online articles critical of the government's bilingual education policy.¹⁹⁴ Ablesh also published articles questioning other aspects of government policy, such as the level of security measures surrounding the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.¹⁹⁵ Partial disclosure over Ablesh's case was not obtained until Dui Hua (a San Francisco based human rights organization)

¹⁹⁴ Hoshur, Shohret. (2008, September 8). *Uyghur Radio Worker Sacked, Detained*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/radio-09082008141404.html>.

¹⁹⁵ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2011, October 18). *Uyghur Political Prisoners Mehbube Ablesh's and Abdulghani Memetemin's Prison Sentences Expire*. Retrieved from <http://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/uyghur-political-prisoners-mehbube-ables-hs-and-abdulghani>.

reported in 2010 that she had most likely been sentenced to three years for “inciting splittism.” Dui Hua speculated that a shorter sentence was probably imposed because Ablesh had posted her writing on overseas websites.¹⁹⁶ In an article dated October 18, 2011, CECC reported Ablesh’s sentence had expired and that she had been presumably released.

On February 28, 2008, Ekberjan Jamal was sentenced to 10 years in prison for “separatism and leaking state secrets” for a post on his personal website relating to material he had sent to friends overseas. Jamal had sent a recording of a protest to his friends in the Netherlands, who in turn, had sent it to RFA’s Uyghur Service. Jamal reposted the article published by RFA’s based on his reporting.¹⁹⁷ Chinese officials’ desire to punish individuals for disseminating information regarding tensions in East Turkestan is similarly evidenced in *China Daily* report dated March 17, 2009.¹⁹⁸ The article described the arrest of a man named “Ya” who had posted details online about a fight between Han Chinese and Uyghurs in an Internet café in Shayar County, near Aksu. According to state media, the post had intended to “disrupt ethnic unity” and “influence social stability.” Although the *China Daily* report says “Ya” admitted to fabricating the story contained in his January 29 post, a February 6, 2009 article by RFA cited an official who “acknowledged that the incident had occurred.”¹⁹⁹

Pre-July 5, Chinese authorities not only silenced online criticism of its policies but also leveled charges of illegal Internet activity to punish the families of “outspoken” Uyghurs. Ablikim Abdiriyim, son of World Uyghur Congress president, Rebiya Kadeer, was sentenced to nine years in prison for “instigating and engaging in secessionist activities” in April 2007. The Xinhua report announcing the sentence alleged Abdiriyim “had spread secessionist articles over the Internet, turned the public against the Chinese government and written articles which distorted China’s human rights and ethnic policies.” In a press release dated April 18, 2007, Article 19, an organization that defends freedom of expression,



Ablikim Abdiriyim, UHRP photo

¹⁹⁶ Dui Hua. (2010). *Official Responses to Uyghur Prisoner List Reveal Information on Unique Cases*. Dui Hua Dialogue, Issue 40. Retrieved from http://www.duihua.org/work/publications/nl/dialogue/nl_txt/nl40/nl40_3a.htm.

¹⁹⁷ Hoshur, Shoret. (2009, April 5). *Youth Jailed for Alleged Separatism*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/uyghurcellphone-04142009165038.html>.

¹⁹⁸ Xinhua. (2009, March 17). *Man arrested after posting rumors of ethnic conflict in NW China*. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-03/17/content_7588345.htm.

¹⁹⁹ Hoshur, Shohret. (2009, February 6). *Ethnic Tensions in Xinjiang’s Internet Cafes*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/xinjianginternetcafe-02062009150519.html>.

called the sentencing indicative of “the restrictions it [China] places on the Internet and other media.”²⁰⁰ In a December 20, 2010 press release Amnesty International stated that imprisonment of Ablikim amounted to an “unacceptable persecution against Rebiya Kadeer’s family.”²⁰¹

Immediate post-July 5, 2009 unrest detentions

In the aftermath of the unrest that engulfed Urumchi in July 2009, the Chinese authorities moved to punish contributors to and webmasters of several popular Uyghur websites. The Chinese government maintained that the websites had been instrumental in mobilizing Uyghurs to attend a peaceful protest on July 5, 2009 in People’s Square. By shutting down the websites and attacking individuals associated with the sites, Chinese authorities delivered an unequivocal message to Uyghurs about the consequences of engaging in “dissenting” activities.

The post-July 5th environment for contributors and webmasters of popular Uyghur websites was extremely unsafe, given that the Chinese authorities had begun to arrest and hand down harsh sentences to key members of the Uyghur community. From documented cases, individuals associated with the Orkhun, Salkin, Diyarim, Xabnam and Uighurbiz websites were targeted.



Gulmire Imin (left) and Memetjan Abdulla (right), detained after July 5, 2009. © RFA

²⁰⁰ Article 19. (2007, April 18). *Leading Uighur Activist Imprisoned in China for Sedition*. Retrieved from <http://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/press/china-sedition.pdf>.

²⁰¹ Amnesty International. (2010, December 20). *China urged to release Uighur activist allegedly tortured in prison*. Amnesty International News. Retrieved from <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/china-urged-release-uighur-activist-allegedly-tortured-prison-2010-12-20>.

In particular, the Chinese authorities targeted members of the Salkin website and meted out harsh sentences of life imprisonment to two Uyghurs affiliated with the group. These individuals include Gulmire Imin for “splittism, leaking state secrets and organizing an illegal demonstration”²⁰² and webmaster, Memetjan Abdulla, who also worked for Uighurbiz (in the same capacity) on “unknown” charges.²⁰³ Regarding Gulmire Imin’s case, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued the following opinion in 2012.

The Government has failed to show in a sufficiently specific and individualized manner the precise nature of the threat posed by Ms. Imin, and the necessity and proportionality of her detention and subsequent conviction. The Working Group therefore concludes that the deprivation of liberty of Ms. Imin is...arbitrary and in contravention of articles 8, 9, 10 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.²⁰⁴

Salkin founder, Nureli Obul received three years imprisonment for endangering state security,²⁰⁵ while the sentence and charges remain unknown for webmaster, Muhemmet.²⁰⁶ Abdugheni Abduwayit, a Salkin webmaster, received a 10 year sentence for posting essays that Chinese authorities regarded as containing “sensitive” material.²⁰⁷

²⁰² Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2010). *Political Prisoner Database, Gulmire Imin*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=7948>; and Vandenberg, Rachel. (2010, August 8). *Uyghur Web Moderators Get Life*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/sentence-08082010190802.html>.

²⁰³ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2009). *Political Prisoner Database, Memetjan Abdulla*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=7579>.

²⁰⁴ United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. (2012, March 21). *Communication addressed to the Government on 21 March 2012 Concerning Gulmire Imin*. Retrieved from [http://www.unwgadatabase.org/un/Document.aspx?id=2869&terms=\(+Uyghur+\)](http://www.unwgadatabase.org/un/Document.aspx?id=2869&terms=(+Uyghur+)).

²⁰⁵ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2010). *Political Prisoner Database, Nureli Obul*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=7814> and Lipes, Joshua. (2010, July 28). *Uyghur Webmasters Sentenced*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/webmasters-07282010170425.html>.

²⁰⁶ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2010). *Political Prisoner Database, Muhemmet*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=7815>.

²⁰⁷ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2012). *Political Prisoner Database, Abdugheni Abduwayit*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=9398>.



Dilshat Perhat, Courtesy of Diyarim.com

Uyghurs involved with the Diyarim website who were subject to criminal procedures included founder and webmaster, Dilshat Perhat (five years imprisonment on endangering state security charges²⁰⁸); “worker,” Obulqasim,²⁰⁹ and contributors, Xeyrinisa (Heyrinisa),²¹⁰ Xalnur (Halnur)²¹¹ and Erkin²¹² were detained. Diyarim webmasters “Muztagh,” “Lükchek,” and “Yanchuqchi” were also detained.²¹³



Tursunjan Hezim in Aksu, July 5, 2007

Photo courtesy of Erkin Sidik

Employees of the Xabnam website were also targeted and included webmaster, Nijat Azat, who was sentenced to ten years imprisonment for endangering state security.²¹⁴ Uyghurs associated with the website Orkhun who were sentenced after the July 5 unrest included webmaster, Tursunjan Hezim (seven years imprisonment on unknown

²⁰⁸ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2010). *Political Prisoner Database, Muhemmet*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=7815>.

²⁰⁸ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2009). *Political Prisoner Database, Dilshat Perhat*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=7644> and Lipes, Joshua. (2010, July 28). *Uyghur Webmasters Sentenced*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/webmasters-07282010170425.html>.

²⁰⁹ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2010). *Political Prisoner Database, Obulqasim*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=7816>.

²¹⁰ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2010). *Political Prisoner Database, Xeyrinisa*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=7818>.

²¹¹ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2010). *Political Prisoner Database, Xalnur*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=7819>.

²¹² Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2010). *Political Prisoner Database, Erkin*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=7817>.

²¹³ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2010, August 7). *Xinjiang Court Imposes Prison Sentences on Uyghur Journalist and Webmasters*. Retrieved from <http://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/xinjiang-court-imposes-prison-sentences-on-uyghur-journalist-and>.

²¹⁴ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2010). *Political Prisoner Database, Nijat Azat*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=7963> and Lipes, Joshua. (2010, July 28). *Uyghur Webmasters Sentenced*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/webmasters-07282010170425.html>.

charges²¹⁵).

According to a Radio Free Asia article dated August 8, 2010, a former cellmate of one of Salkin's webmasters alleged he had been told by his cellmate "at least 100 Salkin moderators were arrested from around the region in connection with the July 5 unrest."²¹⁶ In the same article, a World Uyghur Congress spokesman alleged: "more than 100 forum moderators who worked with Salkin were arrested over July 5."²¹⁷ The spokesman added "that if we add in the moderators of the other two major Uyghur websites, Diyarim and Xabnam, at least 300 Web moderators [must be] detained and jailed in the Uyghur region now."²¹⁸ The Radio Free Asia article also named five webmasters who were mentioned in a Chinese government produced video entitled, *The July 5 Riot from Start to Finish*. The video claims the five, Ahmet Tursun, Muhter, Memetjan Abdulla, Tursun Mehmet, and Gulnisa Memet, along with Gulmire Imin planned the July 5 demonstration in Urumchi during a series of meetings. To date, no information has been provided as to where the five webmasters were employed and to their specific fates.²¹⁹

Uighurbiz

In terms of documented cases of actual detention, the Uighurbiz website and its employees have been particularly singled out for harsh treatment and punishment. The government's response is not particularly surprising, given the website's connection to outspoken Uyghur academic, Ilham Tohti, a professor at the Central University for Nationalities in Beijing. Ilham Tohti launched the Chinese language website in 2006.²²⁰ The website may also have angered the Chinese authorities for its content that focused on economic, social and cultural issues affecting the Uyghur community in particular.

Uighurbiz and Ilham Tohti are noted for their moderate views on Chinese policies aimed at Uyghurs. The persistent harassment of Ilham Tohti and Uyghurs associated with the website demonstrates, however, the narrow space for public debate afforded Uyghurs in China. It further underscores the fact that the Chinese authorities will not tolerate dissent, to any degree and in any language.

On July 6, 2009, regional chairman, Nur Bekri blamed the Uighurbiz website for spreading "inflammatory propaganda and rumors."²²¹ The comment came just more than

²¹⁵ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2011, March 31). *Uyghur Webmaster Receives Seven-Year Sentence*. Retrieved from <http://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/uyghur-webmaster-receives-seven-year-sentence>.

²¹⁶ Vandenbrink, Rachel. (2010, August 8). *Uyghur Web Moderators Get Life*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/sentence-08082010190802.html>.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Jackson-Han, Sarah. (2009, March 6). *Uyghur Scholar Calls for Jobs*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/tohti-03062009130647.html>.

²²¹ Kuhn, Anthony. (2009, October 8). *Uyghur Scholar Caught Up In China's Ethnic Conflict*. NPR. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=113620353>.

a year after the Public Security Bureau had closed down Uighurbiz for the first time for alleged “sensitive” content.²²² Tohti was also interrogated in March 2009 for comments he made regarding high levels of unemployment among Uyghurs.²²³



Ilham Tohti. © Frederic J Brown/AFP/Getty Images, June 12, 2010

In the immediate aftermath of the unrest, Chinese authorities detained Ilham Tohti and between July 8 and August 23, 2009 his whereabouts was unknown. Prior to his detention Ilham Tohti told Radio Free Asia that he had been placed under police surveillance for two days.²²⁴ During his 47-day disappearance expressions of concern were issued from Reporter’s Without Borders,²²⁵ Amnesty International²²⁶ and Scholars at Risk.²²⁷ A July 14, 2009 article in the New York Times reported on the widespread support for Tohti among Han Chinese intellectuals, one of whom, Wang Lixiong, began a petition calling

²²² Jackson-Han, Sarah. (2008, June 12). *Uyghur Web Site Shut Down*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/uyghur_tohti-06122008131618.html.

²²³ Jackson-Han, Sarah. (2009, July 8). *Outspoken Economist Presumed Held*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/Tohti-07082009151608.html>.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Reporters Without Borders. (2009, August 7). *A Month Without Word of Detained Blogger Ilham Tohti*. Retrieved from http://en.rsf.org/china-a-month-without-word-of-detained-07-08-2009_34121.

²²⁶ Amnesty International. (2009, July 20). *Urgent Action: Uighur Activist Held in Beijing*. Retrieved from <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA17/034/2009/en/09e4ad7f-8731-42db-b64e-711de7e9f172/asa170342009en.pdf>.

²²⁷ Scholars at Risk Network, New York University. (2009, July 27). *Call for Urgent Action for Professor Ilham Tohti of China*. Retrieved from http://scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu/Events-News/Article-Detail.php?art_uid=1759.

for Tohti's release.²²⁸ Following his release on August 23, 2009, Ilham Tohti spoke to Radio Free Asia telling reporters "his online activities have been carefully scrutinized by the government and that members of the Uyghur Online staff had been summoned by authorities for questioning as early as March this year."²²⁹ He added: "We do not know the whereabouts of the majority of the editors and staff of Uyghur Online." Speaking in July 2008, Tohti said 67 people worked for the Uighurbiz website.²³⁰

Between August 2009 and January 2014, the Uighurbiz website and Ilham Tohti have been consistently harassed by Chinese authorities, including being subjected to measures such as travel bans, denial of access to schools for his children, cancellation of his courses, email hacking, interrogations, and repeated house arrest.²³¹

Since his January 15, 2014 detention, Chinese police have held Tohti incommunicado.²³² Only three days after his detention, an op-ed in the Chinese state run *Global Times* accused Tohti of links to the "West," delivering "aggressive lectures and being the "brains" behind Uyghur terrorists.²³³ The op-ed was followed by a statement from the Urumchi Public Security Bureau on its Weibo account alleging Tohti "made use of his capacity as a teacher to recruit, lure and threaten some people to form a ring and join hands with key people from the East Turkestan Independence Movement to plan and organise people to go abroad to take part in separatist activities [and]...was involved in splitting the country."²³⁴ He was formally charged with the crime of "separatism" according to a February 26, 2014 article in the New York Times.²³⁵ Reuters described in a February 27, 2014 report that Tohti's lawyer had been denied access to his client since

²²⁸ Wong, Edward. (2009, July 14). *Intellectuals Call for Release of Uyghur Economist*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/15/world/asia/15china.html>.

²²⁹ Jackson-Han, Sarah. (2009, August 24). *Uyghur Economist Freed, Warned*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/tohtifreed-08242009163817.html>.

²³⁰ Musa, Jelil. (2008, June 12). *Uyghur Web Site Shut Down*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/uyghur_tohti-06122008131618.html.

²³¹ World Uyghur Congress. (2014, January 16). WUC Alarmed by the Arbitrary Detention of Ilham Tohti. Retrieved from <http://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/?p=21703%20WUC%20Alarmed%20by%20the%20Arbitrary%20Detention%20of%20Ilham%20Tohti>.

²³² Uyghur Human Rights Project. (2014, January 17). *Uyghur Human Rights Project urges international community to maintain vigilance on the condition of Uyghur academic, Ilham Tohti*. Retrieved from <https://uhrp.org/press-release/uyghur-human-rights-project-urges-international-community-maintain-vigilance-condition>.

²³³ Global Times. (2014, January 18). *Leave no chance for malicious preaching*. Retrieved from <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/838112.shtml>.

²³⁴ Associated Press and Chan, Minnie. (2014, January 25). *Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti accused of 'separatist offenses' by prosecutors*. Retrieved from <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1413164/uyghur-scholar-ilham-tohti-accused-separatist-offences-prosecutors>.

²³⁵ Jacobs, Andrew. (2014, February 26). *China Charges Scholar With Inciting Separatism*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/world/asia/ilham-tohti.html>; and BBC. (2014, February 26). *China Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti on separatism charges*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-26333583>.



*Gheyret Niyaz, March 25, 2010
RFA screen grab from Uyghur Biz*

the January 15 detention.²³⁶ Expressions of concern for Tohti's welfare and calls for his release have come from the United States and the European Union, Chinese citizens, and across the human rights community.²³⁷

Gheyret Niyaz was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment for endangering state security on July 23, 2010.²³⁸ Prior to his arrest and detention in October 2009, Niyaz worked as a senior reporter for the Xinjiang Economic Daily and as an administrator for Uighurbiz. Niyaz had publicly criticized official economic policies and bilingual education, although he was widely viewed as holding many pro-government views.

Niyaz was reportedly sentenced following a one-day trial in Urumchi, which only one family member, his wife, Risalet, was allowed to attend. Risalet was quoted in media reports as saying that Niyaz insisted in court that he had broken no laws, and that he said he had acted in good conscience as a citizen and a journalist. Risalet stated that during Niyaz's trial, prosecutors presented essays Niyaz had written and used interviews he gave to foreign media in the wake of July 2009 unrest in Urumchi as evidence that he was guilty of endangering state security.²³⁹

Mutellip Imin a volunteer with the Uighurbiz website was reportedly detained on January 15, 2014. No information is available regarding the details of his arrest, his current whereabouts or of any criminal charges.²⁴⁰ Prior to his current detention, on July 15, 2013, Imin was held at Beijing Capital International Airport before traveling to Turkey to

²³⁶ Martina, Michael. (2014, February 27). *China denies detained Uighur professor access to lawyer*. Reuters. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/27/us-china-xinjiang-academic-idUSBREA1Q0GH20140227>.

²³⁷ China Change. *Ilham Tohti*. Retrieved from <http://chinachange.org/ilham-tohti/>.

²³⁸ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2010, August 7). *Xinjiang Court Imposes Prison Sentences on Uyghur Journalists and Webmasters*. Retrieved from <http://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/xinjiang-court-imposes-prison-sentences-on-uyghur-journalist-and>.

²³⁹ Uyghur Human Rights Project. (2010, July 23). *Uyghur journalist and webmaster Gheyret Niyaz sentenced to 15 years*. Retrieved from <http://uhrp.org/old/articles/4022/1/Uyghur-journalist-and-webmaster-Gheyret-Niyaz-sentenced-to-15-years-/index.html>.

²⁴⁰ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2013). *Political Prisoner Database, Mutellip Imin*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=10046>.

resume his studies at Istanbul University.²⁴¹ In a remarkable statement posted on his personal blog on December 9, 2013, entitled *I Was a Victim of Enforced Disappearance for 79 Days*, Imin described how police officers interrogated him about his online activities and association with Ilham Tohti.²⁴²



Mutellip Imin, Undated photograph courtesy of Uyghur Online.

On July 15...the police chief came into the room with a stack of several hundred pages he said were about my case and distributed them among the three men. Then they forced me to give them the passwords of my cell phone, PC, email, WeChat, Twitter, Facebook, QQ, etc. They even demanded the administrator password of Uighur Online (www.uighurbiz.net) website which Mr. Ilham Tohti had created to bring harmony between Uighurs and Han Chinese. As the password had changed when I was outside of China, I did not know the new

²⁴¹ Abdilim, Mihray. (2013, July 22). *Uyghur Student Detained at Beijing Airport*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/student-07222013204016.html>.

²⁴² Imin, Mutellip. (2013, December 9). *I Was a Victim of Enforced Disappearance for 79 Days*. Retrieved from <http://mutellipimin.wordpress.com/2013/12/09/i-was-a-victim-of-enforced-disappearance-for-79-days/>.

password. They did not believe me and would continue to ask me for the password several times a day.

Starting on July 16, they took notes. They asked me mainly about my relationship with Ilham Tohti, how I knew him, and Uighuronline. I told them that I had attended his classes and helped him translate some news about Xinjiang from Uighur and English to Chinese. I wrote articles about making the Noruz festival a legal holiday, Han Chinese students living in Xinjiang, the incident on April 23 when a number of Uighurs were killed, and Uighur education in Xinjiang. I also helped manage the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the newer version of Uighuronline: Uighurbiz.net...

...On September 3, three men with video recording equipment came. They looked at the statement I had written and then added the following: 'My eyes were blinded by Ilham Tohti, and I defied my countries [sic] religious policy and played a very bad role on the Internet. Helping to maintain and develop Uighuronline was my essential fault. I also acted badly by broadcasting words that threaten the harmony among groups of people in China.' I was made to sign and fingerprint this statement. I was then forced to read it in Uyghur and in Chinese while they video recorded me. Then, they had me swear before the Chinese flag: 'By this corrective measure, I will abide by the law...' I raised objections, but they threatened to send me to jail for a year or two if I did not cooperate...

...During my 79-day enforced disappearance, I lived in a state of constant torment. I was unable to contact my family to let them know of my whereabouts. All communication with the outside world was severed.

Other Uyghurs associated with the Uighurbiz website have also been subjected to harassment from the Chinese authorities. Perhat Halmurat, an editor at Uighurbiz, was detained at Beijing Capital International Airport on September 28, 2013 before taking up a scholarship to study anthropology at Istanbul University. Authorities accused Halmurat of attempting to flee the country; however, at the time of his detention he was not informed of any charges. With the intervention of a number of domestic activists and lawyers, he was released after 16 hours.²⁴³ In the same report detailing Halmurat's detention, Radio Free Asia revealed that a Uighurbiz webmaster named Shohret Tursun had been detained and interrogated earlier in 2013. During questioning, police forced Tursun to disclose Uighurbiz webmaster passwords.²⁴⁴

Imin, Halmurat and Tursun were detained again as part of a number of arrests around the time of Ilham Tohti's detention in January 2014. The other Uyghurs arrested in the sweep, Abduqeyyum Ablimit, Atikem Rozi, Abdumejid Jelil, Meryemgul, Perhat Ablet,

²⁴³ Abdilim, Mihray. (2013, September 30). *Chinese Authorities Detain Uyghur Web Editor at Beijing Airport*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/detention-09302013190447.html>.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

Atilamu and Dilshat, were also affiliated with Uighurbiz and Professor Tohti.²⁴⁵ According to a February 26, 2014 Radio Free Asia article, Tohti's wife, Guzelnur disclosed that Perhat Halmurat and Shohret Tursun had been formally charged with splittism, while Abdukeyum Ablimit had been formally charged with revealing state secrets. Guzelnur added that the whereabouts of Mutellip Imin and Atikem Rozi were unknown.

Uyghur Internet Users

In addition to website staff, regular Uyghur Internet users have faced ongoing harassment, detention and imprisonment for their online activity that severely restrict their right to free expression, association, and information. The testimonies recounted below are taken from interviews with Uyghurs. They describe a pattern of heavy monitoring of Uyghur web space in East Turkestan and heightened curbs on Uyghur Internet usage during the immediate aftermath of July 5, 2009.

Uyghurs accessing information from overseas or commenting on sensitive material often faced censure. Interviewee 1 told UHRP how police had detained "one or two" Uyghurs for opening alleged sensitive material posted by a Uyghur in Turkey in a WeChat group.²⁴⁶ A second interviewee 4 said one of his neighbors' sons had been detained for three months by police for merely accessing a foreign website at home.²⁴⁷ Interviewee 7, a school-aged Uyghur, said police visited his house after he had watched an undisclosed video online. In his case, the police merely warned his mother to monitor his Internet activity.²⁴⁸ Interviewee 6 explained how an undetermined number of Uyghurs were arrested after viewing a "Turkish movie" in an Internet café. In response, some Uyghurs had written about the incident online and were themselves detained.²⁴⁹

Interviewee 6 also described how police picked up his wife in the summer of 2013 for posting a comment in a WeChat group in response to a suggestion that Uyghurs were "terrorists." During his wife's questioning, he was not allowed access to her. She was eventually released on condition she write a self-criticism, pay a fine and work without salary for a undetermined period at her government funded job.²⁵⁰

Uyghur Internet users were heavily targeted during the immediate aftermath of the July 5, 2009 unrest. Interviewees UHRP spoke to described measures aimed at Uyghurs who posted or viewed the online call to protest on People's Square in Urumchi on July 5 or at Uyghurs seeking more information on events while online. One interviewee shared an

²⁴⁵ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2014, March 4). *Chinese Authorities Arrest Uyghur Scholar Ilham Tohti and Students*. Retrieved from <http://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/chinese-authorities-arrest-uyghur-scholar-ilham-tohti-and-students>.

²⁴⁶ Interviewee 1 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

²⁴⁷ Interviewee 4 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

²⁴⁸ Interviewee 7 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

²⁴⁹ Interviewee 6 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

²⁵⁰ Interviewee 6 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

account of a local street vendor from the south of East Turkestan who was arrested for reposting the call to protest on July 5, 2009 on QQ. The interviewee described the street vendor as not political, but religious. According to the interviewee the street vendor was well known in the neighborhood so he noticed his disappearance approximately a month after the July 5, 2009 unrest. His whereabouts is currently unknown. Interviewee 12 added that in the post July 5 environment people knew they could not write anything about the July 5 unrest online because they would face trouble from the authorities.²⁵¹ Interviewee 13 told UHRP that during lunch at school a friend opened a link from his Q zone account announcing the July 5 protest. In the immediate post unrest period, his friend was detained and disappeared for 2 weeks.²⁵²

Interviewee 11, a school-age Uyghur, told UHRP researchers that one boy from his class was arrested at his home by plainclothes police who covered his head during the unrest before taking him away for questioning over his online activity during July 5, 2009. Interviewee 11 said that several of his other friends had similarly “got into trouble” with the Chinese authorities for accessing overseas websites during the July 5 unrest period.²⁵³ Interviewee 9 said that a friend was detained for “two or three days” after July 5 for his online activity during the unrest. According to the interviewee, the friend alleged he was beaten during questioning before being released.²⁵⁴

Interviewee 13 discussed how his teenaged classmate Ablet had downloaded a video from the Baidu service that documented the Shaoguan attacks on Uyghur migrant workers in June 2009. After Ablet had uploaded the information onto his blog, police arrested him at home. The interviewee was initially unsure about the severity of Ablet’s sentencing because he was too afraid to visit Ablet’s family. He eventually went to visit Ablet’s parents, who told him that Ablet was subjected to a closed trial and was subsequently jailed for six years on charges of “splittism” and “incitement against the government.”²⁵⁵

Beyond July 5, 2009

The tone of Chinese state rhetoric towards Uyghur Internet users who transgress official narratives through their online activity has significantly hardened since the immediate post-July 5th period. The Chinese authorities have moved to characterize alleged “criminal” activity online as closely related to “terrorism.” This is most clearly exemplified in the 2014 terror accusations leveled at widely recognized moderate, Ilham Tohti by the Urumchi Public Security Bureau described above. Reinforcing this trend, in

²⁵¹ Interviewee 12 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

²⁵² Interviewee 13 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2014.

²⁵³ Interviewee 11 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

²⁵⁴ Interviewee 9 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

²⁵⁵ Interviewee 13 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2014.

2013, Chinese authorities punished a number of Uyghur, or suspected Uyghur, Internet users, citing charges of “rumor spreading” and “online jihad.”²⁵⁶

This demonstrates a difference in the approach to the online crackdown enacted across China in 2013 given that terror-related allegations and charges are not regularly applied outside of East Turkestan. However, the allegations and charges are consistent with Chinese government approaches to Uyghur dissent in general, which authorities increasingly characterize as “terrorism” since the 9/11 attacks on the United States. UHRP posits that this shift in Chinese rhetoric regarding online activity is an attempt, through intimidation, to close one of the few remaining platforms for Uyghurs to express their opinion in a public forum and to limit information dissemination related to a series of violent incidents that have taken place, and specifically the violence that occurred in 2013. Such an approach not only has serious implications for freedom of expression rights, but also for freedom of association rights, as many criminal statutes bar the formation of “illegal” groups, which the Chinese authorities describe as “terror” linked.

UHRP also contends that the portrayal of any Uyghur online activity that displeases the Chinese authorities as “terror-linked” is a politically expedient attempt to exploit the Uyghurs’ Islamic faith and tap into prevailing stereotypes of “Muslims as terrorists.” Given that acts of “terrorism” are deemed serious infractions of state security, the Chinese authorities use such an approach to preempt any questions over judicial procedures that fall short of international standards and mute international criticism. Instead of resorting to such draconian methods, the Chinese authorities could put to rest the significant doubts expressed by the critics about the validity of convictions related to online terrorist activity through the implementation of transparent criminal and judicial processes.

In March 2013, 20 Uyghurs were accused of using the Internet, cell phones and digital storage devices to organize, lead and participate in a terrorist organization with the intent to “incite splittism” at five hearings in Kashgar and Bayingolin Prefectures. The sentences handed down by the courts ranged from five years to life imprisonment.²⁵⁷ However, World Uyghur Congress spokesman Dilshat Raxit contended the men did nothing more than download and view videos from YouTube and audio from the Radio Free Asia Uyghur service.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ For an example of the benign nature of alleged rumor spreading and the frequent accusation that such rumors are spread from overseas, see: <http://www.soundislamchina.org/?p=394>.

²⁵⁷ Freedom House. (2013, October 3). *Freedom on the Net 2013*. Retrieved from http://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/FOTN%202013_Full%20Report_0.pdf.

²⁵⁸ Buckley, Chris. (2013, March 27). *China Convicts and Sentences 20 Accused of Militant Separatism in Restive Region*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/28/world/asia/china-sentences-20-for-separatists-acts-in-restive-region.html>; and Uyghur Human Rights Project. (2013, March 27). *Uyghur American Association condemns sentences handed down to 20 Uyghurs*. Retrieved from <http://uhrp.org/press-release/uyghur-american-association-condemns-sentences-handed-down-20-uyghurs.html>.

On June 20, 2013, the *Legal Daily* reported on the sentencing of 19 Uyghurs in Kizilsu, Aksu, Turpan and Karghilik on a number of terror-linked charges related to information gathered, stored and disseminated electronically.²⁵⁹ The activities cited by the courts in the cases included storing audio recordings on a cell phone and media card; duplicating files on a computer and transmitting them via Bluetooth; copying media files on cell phone media cards and storing MP4 recordings; uploading content to a microblog; and browsing “illegal” websites, as well as downloading “illegal” recordings and eBooks. Sentences ranged from two to thirteen years in prison.²⁶⁰

Six other Uyghurs were sentenced to administrative detention ranging from 5 to 15 days in Urumchi, Maralbeshi, Aksu and Uchturpan for activities such as uploading audio files, “spreading rumors” via a QQ group, storing files on media cards and cell phones, as well as purchasing “illegal” books and CDs.²⁶¹

A *Global Times* report dated July 23, 2013, described how 72 people were given administrative detentions for spreading rumors online regarding “terrorist attacks” in a little over two weeks between June 28 and July 15, 2013.²⁶² The period follows a documented Internet shutdown and media blackout that was enforced following an incident in Lukchun on June 26, 2013.²⁶³ The *Global Times* report also states that during this period, 199 people were punished for disseminating 802 rumors. A *Xinjiang Daily* report dated July 23, 2013 said the majority of the rumors had to do with terrorism.²⁶⁴ While a *Tianshan Net* article from July 23, 2013 specifies that rumors were spread through the QQ chat service, Weibo microblogs, and other microblog messaging networks.²⁶⁵

BBC and *Reuters* reported on October 8, 2013 that Xinjiang police had investigated 256 people for “spreading destabilizing rumors” online and a further 139 individuals for

²⁵⁹ Uyghur Human Rights Project. (2013, June 20). *Harsh sentencing of Uyghurs sends message of fear before fourth anniversary of July 5, 2009 unrest*. Retrieved from <http://uhrp.org/press-release/harsh-sentencing-uyghurs-sends-message-fear-fourth-anniversary-july-5-2009-unrest.html>.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Global Times. (2013, July 7). *Rumors squelched*. Retrieved from http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/798531.shtml#Ue_x02QadYo.

²⁶³ World Uyghur Congress. (2013, July). *Pre-5 July 2013 Anniversary and Ramadan Crackdowns: Lukchun, Hotan and Urumchi*. Retrieved from <http://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/wp-content/uploads/WUC-Report-on-Lukchun-Hotan-and-Urumchi-Incidents-2013.pdf>.

²⁶⁴ 新疆日报网讯 [Xinjiang Daily]. (2013, July 23). *提高鉴别力 共同遏制谣言传播 —我区公安机关处置谣言类有害信息800余条* [Raise discernment together to contain the spread of rumors—Our district’s Public Security Bureau identifies more than 800 types of harmful information]. Retrieved from <http://www.xjdaily.com.cn/xinjiang/002/934342.shtml>.

²⁶⁵ Uyghur Human Rights Project. (2013, July 24). *UAA Urges China to Disclose Identities in Latest Round of Administrative Detentions for “Spreading Rumors” in East Turkestan*. Retrieved from <http://uhrp.org/press-release/uaa-urges-china-disclose-identities-latest-round-administrative-detentions-%E2%80%9Cspreading>.

spreading rumors about “jihad, or Muslim holy war, or other religious ideas.”²⁶⁶ *Tianshan Net* noted that 110 people had been detained, of which 94 were administrative and 16 criminal. In addition, 164 individuals were handed warnings. Chinese authorities also detained an alleged “rumormonger,” who disclosed an alternative version regarding the killing by Chinese security forces of 17-year-old Abdubasit Ablimit, according to a *Xinhua* article dated April 17, 2014.²⁶⁷

Two documented cases of Uyghurs censured for “spreading rumors” prior to the 2013 spike in convictions include, the cases of Abdurusul and “Pamir Yasen.” Karamay police detained Abdurusul on October 17, 2011 after posting details online of an October 14, 2011 assault by Han Chinese students on Uyghurs students at Karamay’s Number 2 Middle School.²⁶⁸ A Radio Free Asia report stated he was detained for “disrupting social order,” as well as “spreading rumors.”²⁶⁹ On June 3, 2012 *Tianshan Net* reported that “Pamir Yasen” received 15 days of administrative detention on May 28, 2012 for spreading rumors on the Sina Weibo.²⁷⁰

In 2014, a May 12 report in the *Global Times* detailed how 232 individuals had been arrested since March 2013 (their identities were not revealed) for “dissemination of violent or terrorist videos.”²⁷¹ Citing a *Legal Daily* article, the *Global Times* added that: “Among those arrested, 71 are in criminal detention, 107 are under administrative detention, while 34 people connected to 17 cases have been prosecuted.”²⁷² The article also states “cellphones, computers, portable storage devices, and mobile instant-message applications like WeChat [were used] to download, save, or spread terror-related

²⁶⁶ BBC. (2013, October 8). *China arrests 110 in Xinjiang for spreading online rumors*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-24444505#TWEET915188> and Rajagopalan, Megha. (2013, October 8). *China police target online “jihad” talk amid rumour crackdown*. Reuters. Retrieved from <http://in.reuters.com/article/2013/10/08/china-uyghur-idINL4N0HY20N20131008>.

²⁶⁷ Xinhua. (2014, April 17). *Xinjiang rumormonger detained after attacker’s death*. Retrieved from <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90882/8602007.html>; and, Salon. (2014, April 17). *China says man tried to seize weapons in Xinjiang*. Retrieved from http://www.salon.com/2014/04/17/china_says_man_tried_to_seize_weapons_in_xinjiang/.

²⁶⁸ Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2011). *Political Prisoner Database, Abdurusul*. Retrieved from <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=9320>.

²⁶⁹ Radio Free Asia. (2011, October 18). *克拉玛依数百维吾尔族学生抗议汉族暴力 [Hundreds of Uyghur Students in Karamay protest Han Chinese Violence]*. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/k-10182011094136.html>.

²⁷⁰ 天山网 [Tianshan Net]. (2012, June 3). *公安机关依法查处一网上恶意传播虚假信息行为 [Public Security to investigate the malicious dissemination of false online information]*. Retrieved from http://news.ts.cn/content/2012-06/03/content_6891192.htm.

²⁷¹ Wong, Cathy. (2014, May 12). *232 held for spread of terrorism in Xinjiang*. *Global Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/859820.shtml>.

²⁷² Ibid.

videos.”²⁷³ No further information on the cases has been made available since publication.

An article published by AFP, also issued on May 12, 2014, describes the sentencing of five Uyghurs who were given sentences of between five to 15 years on “separatism and endangering national security” charges. According to a Kashgar court, the five had “distributed content related to ‘jihad and (calling on people) to get ready to go to Afghanistan and Pakistan for jihad’ [as well as] downloaded e-books and videos with content that ‘incited separatism.’”²⁷⁴ According to AFP: “more than 300 cadres and students attended the sentencing gathering. People were clapping and cheering the heavy punishments.”²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Wee, Sui-Lee. (2014, May 8). *One shot dead in China’s troubled Xinjiang after attack on police*. Reuters. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/08/us-china-xinjiang-idUSBREA470E420140508>.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

VII. Online Freedom for Uyghurs Before and After the Shutdown

The 2009-2010 shutdown was a cataclysmic event for the Uyghur Internet because the vast majority of the Uyghur websites that had been popular before that time were closed not only for the entire duration of the shutdown, but in most cases, permanently. Only a small portion of websites migrated to the Chinese blogging site, Blogbus, and an even smaller portion came back online on their original domain. Among the sites that didn't return were the most popular sites which were run by webmasters who were arrested during the post-July 2009 period. These sites included Diyarim, Salkin, Xabnam, and Orkhun.

The following section focuses on the data lost from Uyghur websites after the July 5, 2009 shutdown. The section includes quantitative analyses regarding the number of disappeared websites, as well as the amount of data that vanished with them.

Official records indicate that the total number of sites in East Turkestan fell sharply over this period. In CNNIC's 24th statistical report released in July 2009, there were 8,317 websites listed in East Turkestan. In its 25th report released in January 2010, the total number of sites in East Turkestan dropped sharply to 3,721. Based on these figures, 4,596 sites, or 55% of all sites in East Turkestan, were lost. In the same period, the total number of sites in China grew from 3,061,109 to 3,231,838, an increase of about 6%.²⁷⁶

The far-reaching scale of the shutdown of Uyghur websites during the 2009-2010 period was immediately apparent after the shutdown began in July 2009. In October 2009, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reported that over 85% of Uyghur websites were inaccessible based on a survey of 100 Uyghur-run websites. More than half of the 100 sites in their survey showed connection delays that indicated the sites were closed, including websites which hosted diverse content and BBS forums including Diyarim, Xabnam, Uzmakan, and Uzonline, as well as the portal website Ulinux. Some sites which hosted diverse content had only selected parts taken down, like Gazina, which had its news section removed but not its music and cinema sections. Other sites which hosted diverse content and had registered BBS or comments sections including Akburkut, Tahdir, Uyghurum, and Karamet remained online at the time of the survey but did not let visitors register to post messages. Some nonpolitical and non-sensitive sites like the football-focused Qutyar blog moved to Blogbus, the only blog hosting platform allowed in China.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ The 24th and 25th are online in Chinese. China Internet Network Information Center. (2009, July). *中国互联网络发展状况统计报告. [24th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China]*. Retrieved from: <http://cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/200907/P020120709345315706062.pdf>; China Internet Network Information Center. (2010, January). *中国互联网络发展状况统计报告. [25th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China]*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/201001/P020120709345300487558.pdf>.

²⁷⁷ Reporters Without Borders. (2009, October 29). *Survey of blocked Uyghur websites shows Xinjiang still cut off from the world*. Retrieved from <http://en.rsf.org/china-survey-of-blocked-uyghur-websites-29-10-2009.34859>.

RSF's October 2009 report lists eleven domestic websites from its survey. Nine of the eleven websites listed in the report remained offline or ceased being functional as the shutdown continued, and only two of the sites are back online as of May 2014. The two that were restored are Ulinux, a Uyghur language website portal hosted by Xinjiang University and Akburkut, a cinema website. The Wayback Archive shows that seven of the sites never came back online, including Diyarim, Xabnam, and Uzonline, as well as Gazina, Uyghurum, Tahdir and Karamet which had limited functionality at the time of the RSF report and ultimately shut down altogether. Uzmakan came back online in 2012 and went down again in 2013, as did the Qutyar blog. Of the websites listed in the RSF survey, only completely nonpolitical websites (one run by a government institution and one devoted to films) were allowed to stay online.

In terms of the total number of sites that were shut down, Dilnur Reyhan's October 2009 survey identified a total of 680 Uyghur websites in East Turkestan at the time the Internet was shut down; based on RSF's post-July 5, 2009 analysis that 85% of all Uyghur sites were shut down in the immediate aftermath of the incident, this would amount to 578 sites lost. However, five years later, it is apparent that many of the sites RSF identified as active were eventually disabled, such as Gazina and Uyghurum; a small number of sites did become active again after the Internet was restored, such as Ulinux; and a small number of blogs migrated to Blogbus. Following the restoration of the internet in 2010, there were very few Uyghur websites, and Reyhan estimates that more than 80% of the Uyghur sites never came back online, with the primary exception being non-political blogs.

Aside from blogs and articles posted by webmasters, the most vibrant conversations taking place on the Uyghur Internet at the time of the shutdown were on BBS forums in which Uyghur people could freely communicate with one another about issues of common interest. These BBS forums hosted thousands of users, conversation threads and posts about a wide range of issues. On their index page, each website publicly listed its total number of users, conversation threads and posts. The Wayback Machine's random snapshots of each of these indexed BBS homepages from within 2 months of their shutdown in July 2009 give the last glimpse of their activity before they were taken down. The following table shows the total users, threads and posts of the three main websites Diyarim, Salkin and Xabnam, taken at the last available date of the Wayback Machine's snapshot.

Site	Date	Users	Threads	Posts
Diyarim	5/14/09	57,586	25,033	326,113
Salkin	6/21/09	70,624	54,013	1,008,209
Xabnam	6/30/09	97,877	66,562	1,025,108
Total		226,087	145,608	2,359,430

As the table illustrates, the sites hosted a combined total of over two hundred thousand users, who collectively contributed over 2 million posts in over one hundred thousand threads. There were a total of 6 million Internet users in East Turkestan in 2009 according to CNNIC statistics; therefore, about 4% of all Internet users in East Turkestan could be

represented on one of these three sites.²⁷⁸ Since Uyghurs constitute a relatively small percentage of Internet users in East Turkestan, the percentage of Uyghurs on the sites is even higher than 4%. With regard to their overall popularity, one source states that Diyarim’s web traffic was ranked within the top 100,000 websites in the world at the height of its popularity in 2008.²⁷⁹

These raw statistics indicate that the vast majority of the Uyghur websites that existed at the time of July 2009 shutdown were taken offline by China’s government, and in particular, that BBS forums, Especially those popular with hundreds of thousands of Uyghur netizens, were disabled, their conversations disrupted, and the records deleted. This aspect of the Internet shutdown shows that not only was it an attempt to stop Uyghurs from expressing themselves, but was also designed to eliminate the virtual space in which that expression had been taking place for nearly a decade.

For comparison, UHRP examined usage since the Internet was restored in 2010.²⁸⁰ The statistics show that in the period of about four years since the Internet was reconnected in East Turkestan, users have continued to register for BBS forums on Uyghur websites and hold conversations there. The following table shows data for three of the most popular sites today:

Site	Date	Users	Threads	Posts
Alkuyi	2/24/14	96,369	6,625	132,722
Bagdax	2/24/14	25,949	9,304	181,906
Misranim	2/24/14	130,947	54,658	1,510,187
Total		253,265	70,587	1,824,815

The deletion of the most trafficked Uyghur website and the millions of forum postings contain within had major implications for the way Uyghur people used the Internet after it was restored in 2010. Self-censorship was heightened in the new web space that emerged. A clear divide emerged between those who used the Internet before 2009 and those who did not. Even as Uyghurs embraced new technologies that have developed

²⁷⁸ China Internet Network Information Center. (2010, January). *中国互联网络发展状况统计报告. [25th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China]*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzj/hlwzbg/201001/P020120709345300487558.pdf>.

²⁷⁹ Harris, Rachel. (2011). *Invitation to a mourning ceremony: perspectives on the Uyghur Internet*. Inner Asia: 13 (1). pp. 27-49.

²⁸⁰ All three sites – Alkuyi, Bagdax and Misranim – existed prior to 2009. Only Misranim had robust activity before the shutdown, though nowhere near the scale of Diyarim, Salkin and Xabnam, with just 6,297 users reported on the last date archived before the shutdown by the Wayback Machine on 12/22/08. Interestingly, after the shutdown when Wayback Machine archived Misranim on 6/9/2010, its total users dropped to 2,271, indicating either that the counters had reset during the shutdown or that a number of users deleted their accounts. Alkuyi only had 1,586 users before the shutdown (recorded on 4/13/09), which may or may not have been reset as well before the first Wayback snapshot after the shutdown recorded 3,409 users on 7/21/10. With regards to Bagdax, the Wayback Machine records indicate that its BBS forum moved location after the 2009-2010 shutdown (from bagdax.cn/forum to bbs.bagdax.cn). Thus the earliest post-2010 records indicate the counters started from scratch, with only 150 users as of 1/13/11.

since 2010, such as WeChat, their relationship to these new technologies has been significantly shaped by their memories of the crackdown. This self-censorship also needs to be understood in an environment that is growing increasingly repressive and in which the space for civil society is drastically shrinking.

Pre-2009 Uyghur Language Websites

Prior to 2009, Uyghur language websites had enjoyed a relatively unfettered existence within China's strict censorship rules for almost a decade, in which websites were targeted only individually and never en masse. The first Uyghur website, Makanim, was established in 1998 by an Urumchi-based Uyghur intellectual working in the regional education bureau. It used Latin script, since Uyghur Arabic script software had not yet been developed. In 2001, Makanim was easily accessible from those living outside China and its bulletin board began to attract discussions that focused on Uyghur political independence. The Public Security Bureau therefore closed the site in 2002.²⁸¹

The enthusiasm for the new Uyghur web space is evident on Makanim's description, retrieved from the Wayback Machine archive. The website's "About Us" section discussed the philosophy behind the website, explaining that the Internet was no longer purely the domain of computer engineers, but instead it was a new social model that would determine "survival." More than a dozen people invested their time, money and effort to put together the website, the description reads. "Makanim is like a newborn baby- she needs our respectful care, protection, nurturing, output and attention. This way she can grow each day. Friends, join us, build our beautiful homeland!"²⁸²

In a series of interviews UHRP conducted for this report, interviewees noted a similar feeling of excitement during the early years of the Internet. One Uyghur netizen told us he used a computer for the first time in Urumchi in 1995 - an old Apple machine with a green screen on which he was taught basic programming in high school. After leaving Urumchi for his undergraduate studies, when he returned around the year 2000, other Uyghurs were also growing excited about the World Wide Web, and a tech street had started in Urumchi.²⁸³

Even after the closing of Makanim, the feeling of excitement permeated the establishment of new Uyghur websites in the mid 2000s, with Salkin emerging as the next most popular site.²⁸⁴ This excitement is evident in the story of Dilshat Perhat, who founded Diyarim in 2004-2005. According to one of the interviews, Perhat had an

²⁸¹ Harris, Rachel. (2011). *Invitation to a mourning ceremony: perspectives on the Uyghur Internet*. Inner Asia: 13 (1). pp. 27-49.

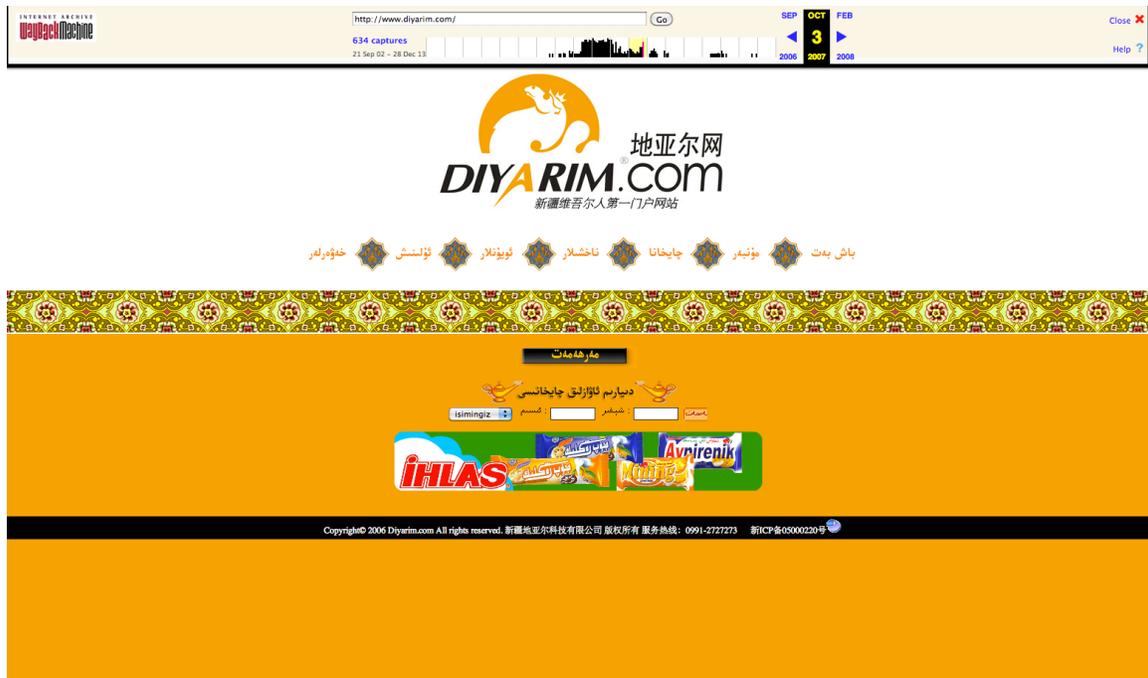
²⁸² Makanim via Wayback Machine. (2000, December 10). 塔克拉玛干网站的由来[*Origin of Taklamakan Website*]. Retrieved from <http://web.archive.org/web/20001210182300/http://www.makanim.com/chinese/about.htm>.

²⁸³ Interviewee 11 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

²⁸⁴ Interview with Dilnur Reyhan, April 2014.

entrepreneurial spirit, and built Diyarim out of genuine interest in technology.²⁸⁵ Diyarim grew with technological advances – first MP3s, then videos – and at first its main role was to provide entertainment. Perhat started to talk to businesses to sell ad banners, which were much cheaper than TV or radio ads. Later as technology developed, the Internet became more widespread, and the site added BBS forums (*munbar*) and chatrooms (*chaihana*). The BBS forum was especially important as a space where Uyghur people could talk. There was a boom during the 2002-2007 period and hundreds of Uyghur websites proliferated. Diyarim employed 10-20 staff, and smaller sites employed 5-10 staff.²⁸⁶

New conversations took place on the BBS forums of Diyarim, Salkin and Xabnam, particularly with Uyghur people living overseas. Although they could not directly critique Chinese policies, overseas Uyghurs were empowered to make comparisons with the new countries in which they lived; for example, a netizen based in the United States could discuss democracy, bilingual education policies and ethnic relations in the United States and make comparisons to East Turkestan.²⁸⁷ MP3s made from clips of CNN would be uploaded. In addition, the sites allowed people to access certain content that was blocked by China’s Firewall. In particular, articles written in Uyghur for Radio Free Asia would be cross-posted, with words like “*Hitay*” changed to “*Zhongguo*.”²⁸⁸



Screengrab from Diyarim archived from October 3, 2007 on the Wayback Machine.

²⁸⁵ Interviewee 11 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

²⁸⁶ Interviewee 11 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

²⁸⁷ Interviewee 11 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

²⁸⁸ Interviewee 14 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2014.

The new web space empowered local actors to publicize grievances in ways that were previously not possible. An important example of this took place in 2007 in the southern county of Yengisar.²⁸⁹ The county party secretary, Yi Xiaoliang forced local farmers to plant beans based on a corrupt deal that eventually fell through, and as a result, the farmers were unable to sell their crops. After one of the farmers was prevented from delivering the petition to the government in Beijing so that the farmers would be reimbursed for their losses from the corrupt deal, they recorded a 66-minute protest video and posted it on YouTube. Although, Radio Free Asia reported that this action did not lead to successful petition,²⁹⁰ it did generate discussion online. In this case, while the added publicity did not earn the Yengisar farmers the money they lost as a result of a corrupt official, it was successful in other ways as it raised issues related to the political costs of corruption.



Uyghur farmer Hakim Siyit posted a video of farmers in Yengisar protesting. © Radio Free Asia

Another aspect of Uyghurs' enthusiasm for this burgeoning web space was its ability to create a virtual community. Not only were Uyghur people able to contact with one another both across the region and overseas, but the Internet also provided easy access to the works of famous academics, writers, comedians and singers. Furthermore, netizens could interact with these figures directly via the web. For example, famous writers responded selectively to comments that netizens had written, allowing readers to engage

²⁸⁹ Harris, Rachel. (2011). *Invitation to a mourning ceremony: perspectives on the Uyghur Internet*. Inner Asia: 13 (1). pp. 27-49.

²⁹⁰ Lipis, Joshua. (2009, January 30). *Uyghur Farmers Appeal, To No Avail*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/longbean-farmer-01302009234055.html>.

their writing even more directly than before.²⁹¹ Thus, the new Uyghur websites formed a dynamic space in which conversations could take place in an exciting new way.

With the advent of audio and video streaming technology, MP3 songs and comedy, as well as music videos formed a growing part of the Uyghur web space. Scholars have noted how comedy is an important means through which Uyghurs explore social identity issues without crossing political lines.²⁹² It is a similar case with music. Song lyrics are also kept away from politics, though a song can address ideas that may have political implications. As one young Uyghur told us: “Everyone knows in their heart [the meaning], but it’s said indirectly.”²⁹³ Because of nationalistic themes in his music in songs such as “Don’t Sell Your Land,” Kuresh Kusen was sentenced to house arrest for three years in the 1990s and later escaped to exile in Sweden, and his case has served as an example for Uyghur musicians to beware of politicizing their music.²⁹⁴

Despite this generally open climate, there have always been limits to what could be said and discussed online. Dilshat Parhat, founder of Diyarim, signed an agreement with Chinese authorities not to permit any postings that might undermine the peace or harm the unity of the motherland.²⁹⁵ The forum sections of pre-2009 sites all clearly stated that no illegal information could be posted; that the source of all information must be made explicit; and that all information must come from a legal source. A clear footer on Diyarim outlined this policy in unequivocal terms:

ئەسكەرتىش: تور بېكىتىمىز ۋە ۋەب سەھىپىمىز دە دۆلەتنىڭ تۈرلۈك قانۇن - سىياسەت پەرمانلىرىغا خىلاپ ماقالىلەر ۋە بولاقلارنى بولماقتا بولمايدۇ. بۇلگۇچىلىك، قۇتارغۇچىلىق خاراكتېرىدىكى ماقالىلەرنى بولغىنى ئاپتونوم رايونلار ئاھالىسىگە ئۆزى مەسئۇل بولىدۇ. تور بېكىتىمىز ھېچقانداق مەسئۇلىيەتنى ئۈستىگە ئالمايدۇ. ئۆز تور مەدەنىيىتىمىزنىڭ ساغلام تەرەققىي قىلىشى ۋە ئوسالغۇسىز ئىلگىرىلىشى ئۈچۈن بۇ مۇنبەرنى ئۆز كۆز قارغۇچىدىن ئايرىشىڭىزنى ئۈمىد قىلىمىز. كېيىنكى پۇشايمان، ئۆزۈڭگە دۈشمىن، مىللەتنى سۆيگۈچىلەر ئۆز نەرسىنى قەدىرلەيدۇ.



It is prohibited to post on the website or in the forum any pictures, videos, or text that violates China’s laws or policies. Writers who post materials that promote separatism or incitement will be responsible for the consequences. Our website will not take any responsibility. We hope to protect our website in order to develop a healthy Internet culture and ensure that our website operates smoothly without

²⁹¹ Interviewee 1 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

²⁹² Beige Wind. (2013, October 24). *Dispatches From Xinjiang: Uyghur Comedy And Abdukerim Abliz*. Beijing Cream. Retrieved from <http://beijingcream.com/2013/10/dispatches-from-xinjiang-uyghur-comedy-and-abdukerim-abliz/>.

²⁹³ Interviewee 9 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

²⁹⁴ See: International Uyghur PEN Center. *Kurash Sultan*. Retrieved from <http://www.uyghurpen.org/kuresh-kusen.html>; and, Listened to the Banned, *Kurash Sultan*. Retrieved from <http://www.listentothebanned.com/index.php?page=kurash>.

²⁹⁵ Harris, Rachel. (2011). *Invitation to a mourning ceremony: perspectives on the Uyghur Internet*. Inner Asia: 13 (1). pp. 27-49.

*obstructions. 'Regret is your own enemy.' If you love your nation, you should protect what you have.*²⁹⁶

Uighurbiz – A Pre-2009 Forum for Mandarin-Language Ethnic Exchange

In addition to allowing Uyghurs to communicate with one another, the web space that developed before 2009 also facilitated greater communication between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. The main vehicle for such exchange was Uighurbiz. Ilham Tohti, the website's founder, described its creation in an autobiographical essay in January 2011:

I founded Uighurbiz because I discovered that many websites and search portals contained a large amount of posts that incited hatred and attacked the Uyghur community. As a result, I strongly felt that deep division existed between the Uyghur and Han peoples due to a lack of mutual understanding. But there was no platform for communication and dialogue. Han and Uyghur netizens have been talking past each other, with no opportunities to exchange views one-on-one and listen meaningfully to each other...

... Moreover, many people in Chinese society discuss the Uyghur people, but not many people possess a basic knowledge of Uyghur society. In a multi-ethnic society, such circumstances are undesirable. Since no one else was doing it, I thought I would fill this gap...

...In addition, I made Uighurbiz a tool to influence and solicit Uyghurs' ideas about society. In Uyghur society today, there are virtually no rational, moderate and constructive voices that grapple with the real problems of the Uyghur society, free of [China's] official, orthodox, and constrained propaganda. From overseas there are no lack of provocative and subversive statements, which don't solve any real problems. As Xinjiang faces the danger of escalating ethnic conflicts, and discussions of ethnic problems tend to be radical, I believe that one of our most important tasks and missions is for us to use rational and constructive voices to compete against more extreme ones in the market place of ideas, moving social sentiments toward a more positive direction.²⁹⁷

He explained in this essay that the site, similar to Uyghur language websites, was monitored meticulously:

Uighurbiz is managed to prevent any pro-independence, separatist, or irresponsible inflammatory postings, and it does not post subversive materials. However, it does not forbid posts that expose social ills in Xinjiang or elsewhere, so long as they show good intentions and the content is authentic.

²⁹⁶ Diyarim BBS homepage via Wayback Machine. (2008, July 2). Retrieved from <http://web.archive.org/web/20080702122917/http://bbs.diyarim.com/>.

²⁹⁷ Tohti, Ilham. Translation by the Uyghur Human Rights Project. (2014, April 6). *My Ideals and the Career Path I Have Chosen*. China Change. Retrieved from <http://chinachange.org/2014/04/06/my-ideals-and-the-career-path-i-have-chosen/>.

Finally, Professor Tohti viewed his website as a vehicle for social change by fundraising for direct social services. A similar fundraising platform on Diyarim was used to raise money in April 2007 for a school for orphans, and during the latter part of 2007, to pay the costs associated with a Uyghur girl's hospital treatment.²⁹⁸ On Uighurbiz, Ilham Tohti described a similar initiative:

Uighurbiz is both a platform for exchanging views as well as a platform to perform acts of public service. In recent years, criminals have abducted, lured, or kidnapped Uyghur children and brought them to the interior of China, where their pickpocketing is increasingly a serious social problem. It disturbs local people's sense of security and also damages the reputation of the entire ethnic community. Although just about everyone knows about this social issue and it has drawn growing attention, not a single media outlet has dared to discuss it because it is deemed too sensitive. No organization or agency has dared to make an attempt to systematically address the problem. Each child is a treasure of the nation and [represents] the future of society, regardless of his or her ethnicity.

For this reason, I set up a platform on Uighurbiz to aid vagrant Uyghur children, to actively reach out to local civic anti-crime organizations, and to offer aid and legal support to vagrant children. This led to a Phoenix Weekly report about the matter, which then led the Xinjiang government to begin putting assistance for vagrant children on its official agenda.

Uighurbiz reopened in 2010, but rather than being hosted in China it transferred its operations to servers that were hosted overseas. This shift enabled Chinese censors to block the entire website by means of the Great Firewall.²⁹⁹ Thereafter, instead of serving as a forum for domestic conversations between Uyghur and Han people, Uighurbiz's audience shifted to only those domestic netizens who had access to Firewall circumvention technology, that is a VPN or Proxy Server, as well as Chinese-speaking netizens outside of China. By hosting the website overseas, Ilham Tohti was no longer directly accountable to China's censors and could publish content that would be blocked in China. However, police constantly harassed both Tohti and others working on the site, as outlined in the previous chapter, until in 2014 he was detained and the site became non-functional as a result of attacks.

Uyghur Websites Today

The effects of the 2009-2010 shutdown are striking given that different generations of Uyghurs were affected differently. Before the shutdown, Uyghur websites flourished for approximately 4-6 years, and the main users were between 15-35 years old (born from

²⁹⁸ Harris, Rachel. (2011). *Invitation to a mourning ceremony: perspectives on the Uyghur Internet*. Inner Asia: 13 (1). pp. 27-49.

²⁹⁹ Greatfire.org records the blocking of Uighurbiz.net dating back to 2011. See: <https://en.greatfire.org/uighurbiz.net>.

the 1970s to the early 1990s).³⁰⁰ The shutdown created a schism between those who had been active online before 2009, and young people who were not active online before 2009 but began visiting Uyghur websites after 2010, when the vast majority of Uyghur websites that had existed previously were shut down. For the older generation, previous political turmoil tempered enthusiasm to communicate freely online, even pre-2009. One netizen told us that after the generations born before the 1970s witnessed crackdowns in Baren, Urumchi, Beijing, and Ghulja, they were less likely to explore the new Internet space.³⁰¹



Screengrab of Wulinix, a web portal run by Xinjiang University restored after the shutdown

The pre-2009 web space was the ideal moment for young people in their 20s and 30s who were old enough to use the Internet, but still young enough to have escaped the scarring of the earlier crackdowns. In the words of one interviewee: “For the new generation, the Internet felt like a new land, a new way to express yourself.... There was entertainment,

³⁰⁰ Harris, Rachel. (2011). *Invitation to a mourning ceremony: perspectives on the Uyghur Internet*. Inner Asia: 13 (1). pp. 27-49.

³⁰¹ Interviewee 11 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

news, forums, everything. You had a lot of options. It nurtured a new generation of intellectuals, and for us this was a land of freedom.”³⁰²

Very few Uyghur websites survived the lengthy shutdown, and following the restoration of services in 2010, the Internet space for the Uyghur community was virtually decimated. A small number of blogs deemed to be non-political and non-separatist were allowed to migrate to Blogbus, the main blogging platform permitted in China. BBS forums, incompatible with the blog system, were almost all closed down. Since 2011, new Uyghur websites started to develop and the majority of Uyghur websites that are popular today date back to this period.³⁰³

The state’s closure of every Uyghur website, except the ones that contained no sensitive content or those which moved overseas, was a clear indicator to Uyghur netizens that their online speech was not free. It was in this environment that netizens rebuilt the Uyghur web. Thus, self-censorship has enforced the state’s increasing restrictions of online freedom.

In particular, the older generation remains active in cautioning the younger generation against expressing anything that might be deemed controversial and, thus, plays an important role in maintaining high levels of self-censorship. Nearly all of the young people born after the 1990s interviewed for the report explained that their teachers and parents clearly instructed them not to post online, for fear that their fates would mirror those of the young people arrested after July 5, 2009.³⁰⁴ Others said their parents would not even allow them to register for accounts that would allow them to post.³⁰⁵ Another young Uyghur described fear of trying to access foreign websites because of IP tracking, thus, even those sites not blocked by the Firewall might be considered off limits.³⁰⁶

As self-censorship has grown since the restoration of the Internet in East Turkestan, state censorship has also grown more severe. One case that occurred in March 2014 clearly demonstrates the manner in which state censorship has become much more severe for Uyghur websites in the post-2009 period. Three Uyghur farmers near Kashgar posted a complaint online about confiscation of their land by government officials.³⁰⁷ Whereas in 2007, a group of farmers in Yengisar similarly posted online to draw attention to an official abuse of privilege and suffered no consequences, the three farmers in 2014 were detained for posting their plight online.

³⁰² Interviewee 11 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³⁰³ Interview with Dilnur Reyhan, April 2014.

³⁰⁴ Interviewees 2 and 8 interviews with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³⁰⁵ Interviewee 8 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³⁰⁶ Interviewee 9 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³⁰⁷ Vandenbrink, Rachel. (2014, March 28). *Uyghur Farmers Detained After Posting Land Complaints Online*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/land-dispute-03282014185922.html>.

Another case that offers a clear comparison of the pre- and post- shutdown periods was offered by a netizen interviewed for this report, who described increased censorship on film websites' comment sections. Specifically, he explained that some people perceived the 2007 film, *A Boy from Yalkuntagh* (*Yalkun tagdin kalgan dapqi*) as a derogatory representation of Uyghurs. People wrote opinions criticizing the film for insulting their culture, and their opinions and discussions stayed online in comments sections. By contrast, when some people felt the 2012 serial drama *Anarhan* similarly insulted Uyghurs, opinions critical of the film were censored online.³⁰⁸ This censorship, likely enacted by webmasters, indicates that such conversations are no longer tolerated.

Certain subjects have always been completely off limits on the Uyghur Internet both before and after the shutdown. As chronicled in the October 2009 study by Dilnur Reyhan, religion and politics have always been topics that have been deemed controversial and were banned even before the shutdown. Certain other topics, such as history and education, fall more into a grey area and are generally dealt with depending on the specific issues relating to the Uyghur community. History is one of the most sensitive topics today, particularly the history of Uyghur people before the People's Republic of China and during the Second East Turkestan Republic, referred to as the "Three District Revolution" in Chinese. Uyghur youth were disturbed by their lack of access to history after the banning of books like *Uyghurlar* by Turghun Almas.³⁰⁹ One interviewee explained that he knew that Uyghur history as it was taught to him was inaccurate, particularly when he was told that the span of this history did not include the *muqam*, a 12 piece musical suite integral to Uyghur cultural history which dates back to the 11th century or older.³¹⁰ "I was told that relative to the 5,000 year history of the Han, Uyghur history was very short. But this did not fit with the history I learned of other Turkic peoples, and the long history of *muqam*. On the Internet, I could not find more about our history."³¹¹ Another noted that what she found online about Turkic history was wrong.³¹² A netizen whose grandfather served in the military of the East Turkestan Republic tried to look up pictures of that period, but found none.³¹³

Similarly, young Uyghurs described recent accounts of history as heavily colored by Chinese state media reports. One netizen explained he believed state reports stating the World Uyghur Congress had masterminded the July 5, 2009 attacks, and that many of his peers were also brainwashed by this propaganda.³¹⁴ Another young woman told UHRP

³⁰⁸ Interviewee 1 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³⁰⁹ Interviewee 10 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³¹⁰ The *muqam* musical suite was formally codified during the Yarkant khanate by Ammanisa Khan during the 16th century, and its 11th century origins date back to musical development in the Karakhanite period. See: Harris, Rachel and Yasin Muhpul. (2002) *Uyghur Music*. Encyclopedia of the Turks, vol. 6. Istanbul: Yeni Turkiye, pp542-9. Retrieved from: <http://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/?p=476>.

³¹¹ Interviewee 9 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³¹² Interviewee 12 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³¹³ Interviewee 4 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³¹⁴ Interviewee 8 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

researchers that when her mother came to visit her in the United States for a week, she spent much of her time watching videos online, particularly those concerning July 5. The interviewee's mother brought a banned video to China on her mobile phone, and a friend was extremely excited to see it, even though he knew it was at great personal risk.³¹⁵

Chinese education policy is another major topic for discussion on Uyghur websites that is deemed “sensitive,” specifically discussions that focus on the usage of the Uyghur language in public schools. Even after 2009, the Uyghur linguist Abduweli Ayup actively used Uyghur websites to promote the cause; for example, discussing his work in a long-form video interview with Misranim in 2010, including plans to grow and sell organic halal foods, and to legally establish a Uyghur language school.³¹⁶ Ayup raised money on these sites to fund a Uyghur language kindergarten, which was subsequently shuttered by authorities.³¹⁷ In August 2013, he was arrested for his activism.



Screengrab of Abduweli Ayup from Misranim interview

³¹⁵ Interviewee 4 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³¹⁶ *Abduweli Ayup Bilen Misranim tor bitide Suhbet*. (2012). Misranim via YouTube. Retrieved from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzAAai8HudE>.

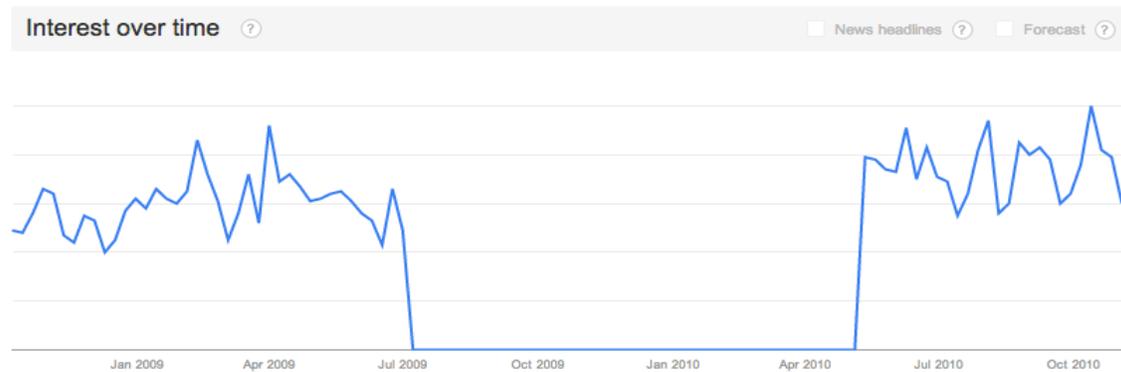
³¹⁷ Lipes, Joshua. (2014, January 31). *Investigations Into Case of Jailed Uyghur Language Activist Extended*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/language-01292014183031.html>.

Uyghur people are fully aware of the pitfalls of frank online discussion and they have figured out specific strategies to avoid censorship. A number of netizens living overseas told us that when they communicate with family in East Turkestan, they use code words to talk about sensitive topics. For example, when describing Rebiya Kadeer, they would say “grandmother,” or “respected woman;” and when describing the asylum process, they would call it a “test.” This trend mirrors similar patterns of Chinese web users who have developed alternative vocabularies in order to discuss topics banned by censors.³¹⁸ It demonstrates not only an awareness of censorship, but also a resiliency and belief that China’s censorship mechanisms can be circumvented, at least in the context of certain conversations.

Blocking Uyghur-Related Words on Chinese Websites and Social Media

Researchers on Internet censorship in China have developed innovative means for tracking which keywords are blocked in China, which social media posts are taken down, and even what instructions are given to webmasters to censor their respective sites. This research focuses on Chinese language websites, and such information as blocked words on Uyghur search engines, deleted posts on Uyghur BBS forums, and Uyghur-language censorship instructions has not been collected. The censorship of Chinese language websites also reveals a great deal about Uyghurs and East Turkestan, especially as censorship of Chinese websites limits the freedom of speech of Uyghurs or about East Turkestan.

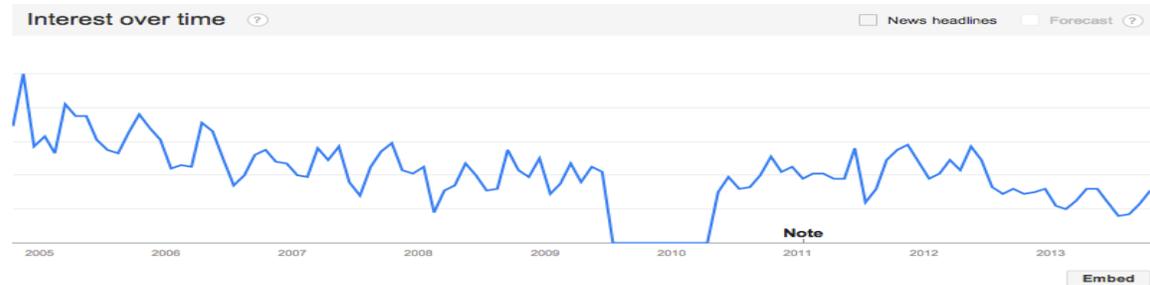
An example of research focused on Chinese language censorship that highlights the digital plight of East Turkestan occurred after the 2009-2010. In *Blocked on Weibo*, scholar Jason Q. Ng presents a graph of Google searches in East Turkestan showing search activity over time.³¹⁹ It shows that all searches fell to zero for the period between July 2009 and April 2010.



³¹⁸ Qiang, Xiao. *The Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon: Translating the Resistance Discourse of Chinese Netizens*. China Digital Times. Retrieved from http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/The_Grass-Mud_Horse_Lexicon.

³¹⁹ Ng, Jason. *Blocked on Weibo: Blocked on Weibo: What Gets Suppressed on China’s Version of Twitter (and Why)*. (New York: The New Press, 2013). p. xi. Graph was retrieved from <http://www.google.com/trends/explore#q=a&geo=CN-65&date=10/2008%2025m&cmpt=q>.

The same graph can be recreated in Chinese. For example, here is a similar chart for “history” in East Turkestan for the dates ranging from 2005 to 2013:³²⁰



The chart indicates that searches for the term “history” similarly dropped off to zero during the shutdown. The Google search data reflects the usage of all people in East Turkestan who searched the word in Mandarin, including both Han and Uyghurs. Han, who make up over 40% of the population and are estimated to have higher rates of Internet access in East Turkestan, are likely the majority of these users. However, Uyghur people also use Chinese websites, particularly the younger generation, who are increasingly educated in Mandarin instead of the Uyghur language.

Keywords in Chinese that relate to Uyghurs are frequently blocked on Chinese websites. *Blocked on Weibo* reviews over 150 blocked terms on Sina Weibo and provides context to the censorship. Among them are several words in Chinese that refer to Uyghurs. The names of two cities in East Turkestan, Kashgar and Kucha, were blocked following clashes between Uyghurs and Chinese police officers first in Kashgar on August 4 2008, then in Kucha on August 10. Ng notes that Kucha was blocked since at least November 2011, and Kashgar since early 2012 probably following another violent incident that occurred there in February 2012. In addition, the Chinese word for Islam was blocked, likely due to tension in East Turkestan.³²¹ In both cases, Chinese censorship of benign words relating to Uyghurs stifles conversations about current events and prevents discussion relating to religion.

China Digital Times, a Berkeley-based media watchdog group, monitors censorship on Chinese websites by collecting lists of banned search terms as well as specific instructions from the government propaganda bureau to block searches in Chinese. These frequently include discussions of Uyghurs. Recently, such search blocks have immediately followed violent incidents that have occurred in East Turkestan.³²² For

³²⁰ Google Trends. Search for: 历史[history], Location=Xinjiang, Date range=October 2008-October 2010. Retrieved from: <http://www.google.com/trends/explore#q=%E5%8E%86%E5%8F%B2&geo=CN-65&date=10%2F2008%2025m&cmpt=q>.

³²¹ Ng, Jason. *Blocked on Weibo: Blocked on Weibo: What Gets Suppressed on China’s Version of Twitter (and Why)*. (New York: The New Press, 2013). pp. 172, 190.

³²² See: China Digital Times. (2013, December 16). *Minitrue: Deadly Clash in Xinjiang*. Retrieved from: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/12/minitrue-deadly-clash-xinjiang/>; China Digital Times. (2013, November 12). *Censorship Vault: Attack in Hotan, Xinjiang*. Retrieved from: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/11/censorship-vault-attack-hotan-xinjiang/>; and, China Digital Times.

example, after a May 22, 2014 bombing in Urumchi, all websites were ordered to prominently display four headlines about antiterrorism on their homepages.³²³ In addition, the site also features deleted Weibo posts preserved on Free Weibo, a website dedicated to archiving deleted Weibo posts. Posts related to Uyghurs are frequently deleted and preserved, including a recent image posted to the site showing a police officer in a woman's living room pointing to a neat stack of books on the floor, with the message: "This isn't shaming, this is terrorizing! She faces an unknown fear."³²⁴ This censorship of Chinese language posts on popular Chinese social media sites highlights that Uyghurs are not targeted on Uyghur websites alone. Controlling information about Uyghurs for Chinese speakers, mostly Han, is another state objective.

The censorship process that occurred after a knife stabbing in Kunming on March 1, 2014 illustrated censorship inconsistencies. Ng's "Blocked on Weibo" blog shared a number of blocked search terms connected to the incident, such as "terrorist + Xinjiang," "Xinjiang and Kunming station," "Muslim and Kunming station," and "Uyghur and Kunming Station." But the phrase "Kunming train station" itself was notably left unblocked.³²⁵ China Digital Times posted a media directive from the state which forbade media from treating the story with "large headlines" or publishing photos, and instructing media to reprint Xinhua's alert.³²⁶ Anthropologist, Dru Gladney commented to the *New York Times* that the dearth of information would result in increased stereotyping of Uyghurs. "By not providing more information, the government gives support to the stereotype that all Uighurs are terrorists."³²⁷

This is not to suggest that there was no chronicling about the incident on Chinese social media. *Tea Leaf Nation* wrote on March 3 that "Kunming" was the most popular discussion topic on Sina Weibo.³²⁸ A single post from popular blogger Han Han was

(2013, June 27). *Ministry of Truth: Xinjiang Violence*. Retrieved from: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/06/ministry-of-truth-xinjiang-violence/>.

³²³ China Digital Times. (2014, May 24). *Minitrue: Urumqi Attacks*. Retrieved from: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2014/05/minitrue-urumqi-attacks/>.

³²⁴ See for example: China Digital Times. (2013, April 30). *River Crab Archive: Book-Terror in Uyghur Home*. Retrieved from: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/04/river-crab-archive-book-terror-in-uyghur-home/>. For a complete listing of posts blocked on Weibo, see Free Weibo: www.freeweibo.com. Search words related to Uyghurs are blocked including *xinjiang*, *weiwuer*, and *dongtu*.

³²⁵ Ng, Jason. (2014, April 3). *March 1 Kunming Train Station Stabbing Keywords Xinjiang*. Blocked on Weibo Blog. Retrieved from: <http://blockedonweibo.tumblr.com/post/78548250487/march-1-kunming-train-station-stabbing-keywords-xinjiang>.

³²⁶ Reporters Without Borders. (2014, March 4). *Authorities Censor Coverage of Kunming Station Attack*. Retrieved from: <http://en.rsf.org/china-authorities-censor-coverage-of-04-03-2014,45949.html>.

³²⁷ Jacobs, Andrew. (2014, March 4). *Chinese Officials Seek to Shift Attention From Rampage*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/05/world/asia/chinese-officials-seek-to-shift-attention-from-rampage.html>.

³²⁸ Lu, Rachel and David Wertime. (2014, March 3). *'Enemies of Humanity' – China Debates Who's to Blame For the Kunming Attack*. Tea Leaf Nation. Retrieved from <http://www.tealeafnation.com/2014/03/enemies-of-humanity-china-debates-whos-to-blame-for-the-kunming-attack/>.

shared over 200,000 times in which he condemned terrorism, while also “wishing that we don’t place our hatred on an entire ethnicity or an entire religion.”³²⁹ A user from Benxi City in Liaoning Province said that the incident deepened his prejudice against Uyghurs.³³⁰ A post from CCTV’s Weibo account generated over 6,000 comments in the discussion section as of March 5, including calls for moderation, as well as verbal attacks on Uyghurs like the following: “Uyghurs are just a bunch of bearded sissies! Bullying the weak and fearing the strong!” In the wake of the incident, a Uyghur netizen wrote on UHRP’s Chinese blog to highlight hate speech against Uyghurs and ask why it was not censored.³³¹

After the Kunming incident, a hashtag that was aimed at ethnic reconciliation trended on Sina Weibo, called “I am a Xinjiang person.” It was among the top hashtags, and still ranked at #12 four days after the incident on Wednesday, March 5, with over 22,800 likes and 1,588,900 related conversations in the previous week.³³² Its description reads: “I am a Xinjiang person, and also an innocent citizen. The citizens here are hardworking and kind, please do not blindly label us as dissidents, we have also suffered, and our hearts are deeply saddened. We pray for Kunming, may the dead rest in peace, and the living remain strong.” That this hashtag was not censored, and was allowed to generate so much interest, does indicate some latitude for discussion of ethnic issues on Chinese sites, although this still takes place within a system of high censorship.

Censorship of content relating to Uyghurs is not exclusively the domain of Chinese companies like Sina and Tencent. Part of the cost of doing business for Western companies in China is to adhere to Chinese laws, and Western companies are also implicated in censorship that impacts the Uyghurs. For example, trying to type the phrase “Xinjiang Independence” to have the words engraved on an Apple device will return an error message on the Apple website in China.³³³ In 2013, Apple removed an app from its online store which contained important books about Tibet and East Turkestan by Han writer, Wang Lixiong.³³⁴ Recently, Microsoft has come under fire for censoring content in its Bing search engine that contains words or phrases that are deemed “sensitive.” For example, searching for the Dalai Lama’s name in Chinese on the site yields heavily

³²⁹ @Han Han. (2014, March 2). Sina Weibo. Retrieved from: <http://weibo.com/1191258123/Az2jeiEcq>.

³³⁰ @传阿森纳曝AC米兰. (2014, March 2). Sina Weibo. Retrieved from <http://weibo.com/2155323955/Az4KIupUC>.

³³¹ UHRP Chinese Blog. (2014, April 30). 昆明事件给维吾尔人带来的‘网络暴力.’ [Kunming Incident Brings an “Online Riot” to Uyghurs]. <http://chineseblog.uhrp.org/?p=53>.

³³² The page of the hashtag can be found here: Sina Weibo. “#我是新疆人#.” [#I am a Xinjiang Person]. Retrieved from: http://huati.weibo.com/261660?from=weibo_tab_user_topic.

³³³ Makinen, Julia. (2014, February 7). *In China, Apple will engrave iPads — if the words aren't too political*. LA Times. Retrieved from: <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-apple-china-censors-20140207,0,2377786.story#axzz2suXLWIZQ>.

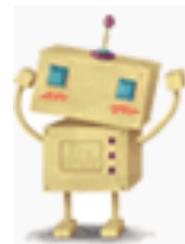
³³⁴ Woesser, Tsering. (2013, May 2). *Woesser’s Statement on Apple’s Censorship of Tibet*. Invisible Tibet. Retrieved from: <http://woesser.middle-way.net/2013/05/woessers-statement-on-apples-censorship.html>

censored search results, and only in China is there a notification given that censorship is taking place.³³⁵

Uyghurs on Chinese Social Media

In addition to Chinese social media sites censoring posts that deal with Uyghurs, they also target Uyghur users of the sites employing heightened censorship protocols and creating obstacles to normal use. Uyghur people report discrimination signing up to use Chinese social media sites, and once registered, posts by Uyghurs on these sites are also censored, regardless of the topic or language they use. Despite these impediments, Uyghurs frequently use Chinese social media, including QQ and Qzone, Renren, and especially, WeChat.

One Uyghur netizen reported that on Renren, non-Han names could not be searched.³³⁶ For instance, a search for the Chinese transliterations of two Uyghur names, “*A Bu Du Xu Ku Er*” and “*Ai Li Pa Ti*” yields zero results, with no warning or indication that the results are censored. Searching a truncated version of the name “*Ai Li*” which conforms to a two- or three- character pattern that is more typical of Han names, yields 16,438 results, indicating that definitively non-Han names, longer than three characters, are censored. However, the same search for “*Ai Li*” with the geographic location restricted to East Turkestan yielded the following error message: “Based on relevant laws and regulations, search results for “*Ai Li*” could not be displayed,” along



with the picture of a dismayed robot.³³⁷ These search results clearly indicate that Uyghur names longer than three characters are censored on the Renren social media site.

Robot icon appears with an error message when searching Uyghur names on Renren

When posting on websites, some posts show up in real time and some are held for review by a moderator before they can be seen by the public. A Uyghur netizen active on Renren explained that having a Uyghur name on the site would cause a user on Renren to experience lag times of several weeks to a month for the moderator to release any post. He explained that this is not simply a translation issue and is the same for posts in Chinese as well as in Uyghur. Even benign posting, such as links to a music video, has this lag time, which discourages Uyghur people from posting on these websites.³³⁸

Not only do Uyghurs experience difficulty in posting on social media sites, but even registering for an account can pose numerous challenges. A Uyghur netizen based in Hunan Province blogged in 2013 about facing discrimination when he applied for a

³³⁵ Greatfire.org. (2014, February 11). *Bing Practicing Chinese Censorship Globally*. Retrieved from <https://en.greatfire.org/blog/2014/feb/bing-practicing-chinese-censorship-globally>.

³³⁶ Interviewee 12 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³³⁷ Search was conducted on Renren from Washington, DC on January 13, 2014.

³³⁸ Interviewee 12 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

WeChat account. He was required to submit personal information not normally required for registration, and then after his information was rejected, he was told that he would never be allowed to register for an account on the site.³³⁹

Even for Uyghurs who report being able to post freely on Chinese social media, posts are frequently deleted. A Uyghur netizen interviewed for this report, who is active on Sina Weibo, said his posts and comments were frequently deleted. Any comment would be deleted within 2 to 3 days accompanied by an alert message if it had national security implications. For example, all of his comments on Sina Weibo posts from Uighurbiz blogger, Mutellip Imin, were deleted. He had also posted in October 2013 about China's Universal Periodic Review before the UN's Human Rights Council, linking to content hosted outside China that included information that was not reported within China; this post was also deleted.³⁴⁰

Because of the real-time communication on WeChat, Uyghur netizens interviewed for the report shared a sense that WeChat was more difficult to censor than other Chinese social media tools, and thus users could say things that they could not post on microblogs or forums.³⁴¹ For example, a Uyghur in Beijing was kicked out of his hotel room after the October 2013 Tiananmen car crash, and he was able to tell his friend about this in Urumchi over WeChat. However, people who posted about the same treatment to social media would find not only the post deleted, but also their entire account disabled.³⁴² Nevertheless, other WeChat users reported that if a user writes sensitive words including ethnicity (*minzu*) or thug (*baotu*) in chatting tools like QQ or WeChat, they would immediately receive a warning.³⁴³ Another Uyghur interviewee explained that she could not upload images containing the Uyghur language to Renren or WeChat. For example, she saw an image of a discriminatory recruitment ad that said “no minorities” on Renren and on WeChat, but was unable to share it.³⁴⁴

Instant messaging services including WeChat have been singled out in a one-month campaign by Chinese authorities announced in May 2014. The government announced plans specifically to prevent “hostile forces at home and abroad” from communicating over the platform, possibly in response to a bombing incident that occurred in Urumchi earlier in the month.³⁴⁵ Authorities in Hotan also announced in May 2014 that WeChat

³³⁹ Semet, Barat. (2013, May 25). 从申请微信公众账号被拒说起【我的维权之路】. [Rejected from Applying for a WeChat Account: Path to Defending my Rights]. Midnight Café Blog. Retrieved from: http://barrywey.blogspot.com/2013/05/blog-post_25.html.

³⁴⁰ Interviewee 8 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³⁴¹ Interviewee 1 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³⁴² Interviewee 7 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³⁴³ Interviewee 6 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³⁴⁴ Interviewee 2 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³⁴⁵ Watt, Louise. (2014, May 28). *China Cracks Down on Instant Messaging Services*. Associated Press. Retrieved from <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/china-cracks-down-instant-messaging-services>.

was disabled in the county.³⁴⁶ WeChat was previously disabled in nearby Hanerik after an incident in which police shot innocent Uyghurs in August 2013.³⁴⁷

In spite of censorship, Uyghurs have at times used Chinese social media to assert their ethnic identity. A recent example involved the *doppa* hat, a square or round skullcap, which is a symbol of Uyghur culture, as well as religious identity. After 2009, Uyghurs conceived of a *doppa* festival to be celebrated on May 5 in order to encourage understanding of Uyghur culture, in which Uyghur people would wear the *doppa* to celebrate their culture. The festival was broadcast mainly through Uyghur websites, as well as by Chinese state media.³⁴⁸ Over the past several years, official support for the festival has waned, and students have attempted to use social media to keep the tradition alive. A Uyghur student from Urumchi interviewed for this report recalled that prior to May 5, 2013, students distributed information about the festival via WeChat. The next day, teachers warned students not to come to school wearing their *doppa*. Students gathered outside the school in protest, and were questioned by the school office, and told that if they continued to circulate information online, not only they, but also their parents would be punished. As a result, the whole school was forced to do an extra hour of physical training for a week and to leave their *doppas* at home.³⁴⁹ A student interviewee from Ghulja said that his principal directly forbade their class from wearing the *doppa* after information about the plan circulated online.³⁵⁰ Another student interviewee from Urumchi described a plan to wear the *doppa* on a separate date to coincide with the Noruz New Year festival on March 20, 2013. Similarly, their teachers were alerted to the plan and warned students that if they did not remove their hats outside of school, they would not be allowed inside the school.³⁵¹

The targeted censorship at all levels – from registration, to name searches, to posting content, to the deletion of content that is posted, and finally to the use of chat services to share information – indicate that Uyghurs experience a heightened level of scrutiny that is fundamentally discriminatory. Although this discrimination is perpetrated not always by state agents, but by private Chinese social media companies, these companies ultimately answer to state authorities. Thus, China’s government has created an environment in which discrimination against Uyghurs by Internet companies is not only legal, but in essence, lauded as a “best practice.” The value of such a communication platform is that it not only enables Uyghur netizens to communicate with each other, but

³⁴⁶ Lu Yang. (2014, June 9). 新疆和田今日起实行即时通讯工具管制. [*Hotan, Xinjiang to Implement Instant Messaging Controls From Today*]. Voice of America. Retrieved from <http://www.voachinese.com/content/xinjiang-hetian-20140528/1924160.html>.

³⁴⁷ Jacobs, Andrew. (2013, August 26). *Over News of Clash, a Shroud of Silence in Xinjiang*. New York Times. Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/27/world/asia/over-news-of-clash-a-shroud-of-silence-in-xinjiang.html>.

³⁴⁸ Fay, Greg. (2014, May 16). *Schools in East Turkestan Suppress Doppa Festival*. Uyghur Human Rights Project Blog. Retrieved from <http://weblog.uhrp.org/schools-in-east-turkestan-suppress-doppa-festival/>.

³⁴⁹ Interviewee 9 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

³⁵⁰ Interviewee 13 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2014.

³⁵¹ Interviewee 6 interview with the Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2013.

also exposes them to a broader Chinese audience as well. That the Uyghurs continue to use the services of these companies, in spite of the blatant discrimination leveled against them, speaks to the power and influence of social media technologies.

Cybersecurity for Uyghurs Overseas

In addition to blocking overseas websites that host content that China deems “unsuitable” by means of the Great Firewall, another approach through which China silences its critics is through cyberattacks – which target and remove unwanted websites or content, or disable the email and online activity of Uyghur activists. Cyber-espionage is by its nature covert, and China’s government does not make public a campaign of cyberattacks against overseas Uyghur activists. Nevertheless, attacks originating from China indicate that either the government itself has sponsored these cyberattacks, or that at the very least, it has provided shelter for those who have launched these attacks.

As documented in Reyhan’s study, overseas Uyghur websites host a variety of content and discussions that is prohibited within China, particularly those that center on religion and politics. In addition, overseas Uyghur activists use email and social media to communicate and carry out work to counter China’s disinformation campaigns. Uyghur rights websites in particular are frequently targets of attacks and harassment. Most recently, after the detention of Ilham Tohti in January 2014, the Uighurbiz website flashed the following message: “We are under constant DDoS attack and will be back soon!!” DDoS attacks, or distributed denial-of-service attacks, involve flooding a website’s servers with information requests so that the website cannot function.

维吾尔在线 - UighurOnline

We are under constant DDoS attack and will be back soon !!

Screenshot of the Uighurbiz.net homepage closed due to DDoS attacks.

Overseas websites have reported a number of cyberattacks in recent years, particularly since July 5. For example, DDoS attacks on the Uyghur American Association and Uyghur Human Rights Project websites took place in September 2012, and the websites were down for about two weeks. Prior to that, the sites were attacked in December 2010. Regularly, web vulnerability scanners access the UAA and UHRP websites from China, and try to take down the sites. The UHRP webmaster blocks the IP addresses which attempt malicious behavior – and the growing list of blocked IP addresses now includes over 200. The vast majority of these IP addresses are located in China. In fact, preventing cyberattacks is one of the UHRP webmaster’s primary responsibilities. Nor is the Uyghur Human Rights Project the only Uyghur activist website under attack. In late 2009, WUC’s website was destroyed by cyberattacks and on the second anniversary of July 5,

its website was disabled through DDoS attacks.³⁵²

The most recent DDoS attack on the Uyghur American Association website took place on May 21, 2014, just hours before a major bombing incident in Urumchi. The website hosting company explained that the domain was once again the source of a DDoS attack and in order to prevent further downtime for other customers and prevent further harm to the server, it would be disabled. UAA staff contacted the hosting company to explain that in the current crisis situation, the website's operations were especially crucial to serve our community. Four days later, service was restored.

In 2009, cybersecurity researchers discovered a major cyberattack that had been initiated within China and which targeted Tibetan activists. The investigation, known as Ghostnet, involved hacking the cyberattacker in order to gain more knowledge about the technology and methods behind the Chinese attack on Tibetan activists. Following this research, cybersecurity researchers began to identify similar attacks targeting Uyghurs, particularly those engaged in rights activism.³⁵³ Two computer firms have focused most on the Uyghur case: Kaspersky Lab, a Russian cybersecurity software development firm and Alienvault, a California-based cybersecurity firm.

The Kaspersky computer lab analyzed a wave of attacks that targeted Uyghur groups in 2012.³⁵⁴ Uyghurs, as high profile Mac users, were targeted with a wave of APT attacks tailored to Mac systems, most commonly used by Uyghur activists.³⁵⁵ The attacks were written in Uyghur and contained an attachment that would grant control over the user's system. Alienvault identified them as an update to a previous attack targeting Tibetans, in this case to target Uyghurs.³⁵⁶

In 2013, Kaspersky and Alienvault released information about a new wave of cyberattacks against Uyghurs. The spearphishing mails exploited a technical vulnerability in Microsoft Office for Mac. Users who received the attack emails were asked to download files with names related to their activism on behalf of Uyghur human rights, such as "Deported Uyghurs" in English and "Hosh Hewer," or "Good News" in

³⁵² World Uyghur Congress. (2011, July 1). *World Uyghur Congress (WUC) Victim of DDoS Cyber Attacks*. Retrieved from <http://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/?p=8978>.

³⁵³ For more on the Ghostnet operation see: Deibert, Ronald. *Black Code: Inside the Battle for Cyberspace*. (Toronto: Signal, 2013). pp. 21-28.

³⁵⁴ Raiu, Costin. (2012, June 29). *New MacOS X backdoor variant used in APT attacks*. Secure List. Retrieved from: http://www.securelist.com/en/blog/208193616/New_MacOS_X_backdoor_variant_used_in_APT_attacks.

³⁵⁵ An advanced persistent threat (APT) is a network attack in which an unauthorized person gains access to a network and stays there undetected for a long period of time.

³⁵⁶ Blasco, Jaime. (2012, June 29). *New MaControl variant targeting Uyghur users, the Windows version using Gh0st RAT*. Alien Vault. Retrieved from <http://www.alienvault.com/open-threat-exchange/blog/new-macontrol-variant-targeting-uyghur-users-the-windows-version-using-gh0s>.

Uyghur.³⁵⁷ Kaspersky noted a significant spike in the attacks during January and February 2013. Once in a user's system, the attacker can quickly gain access to contacts and move on to higher value targets.³⁵⁸

In April 2013, yet another threat emerged: this time based on a sophisticated malware called Oday, another spearphishing attack which targeted a vulnerability in Adobe. Among the PDF files used to bait Uyghur Mac users were files announcing the Noruz community celebration in Virginia, and a solicitation for funding proposal for overseas Uyghur groups.³⁵⁹

Already blocked by the Great Firewall, these sites nevertheless pose a significant enough challenge that China directs, or at the very least allows, attacks against them to be initiated within China with impunity. Thus, cyberattacks targeting overseas Uyghurs demonstrate the lengths to which the Chinese information control apparatus will extend itself in order to restrict any information that highlights the human rights situation of Uyghurs in East Turkestan.

³⁵⁷ Blasco, Jamie. (2013, February 13). *Cyber espionage campaign against the Uyghur community, targeting MacOSX systems*. Alien Vault. Retrieved from <http://www.alienvault.com/open-threat-exchange/blog/cyber-espionage-campaign-against-the-uyghur-community-targeting-macosx-syst>.

³⁵⁸ Raiu, Costin. (2013, February 13). *Cyber Attacks Against Uyghur Mac OS X Users Intensify*. Secure List. Retrieved from https://www.securelist.com/en/blog/208194116/Cyber_Attacks_Against_Uyghur_Mac_OS_X_Users_Intensify.

³⁵⁹ Blasco, Jamie. (2013, March 14). *Latest Adobe PDF exploit used to target Uyghur and Tibetan activists*. Alien Vault. Retrieved from <http://www.alienvault.com/open-threat-exchange/blog/latest-adobe-pdf-exploit-used-to-target-uyghur-and-tibetan-activists>.

VIII. Recommendations

For the Chinese Government:

- Encourage an atmosphere of freedom of speech on Uyghur political, economic, historical, social and cultural issues online to ensure a rational and transparent discussion between Uyghurs and Han Chinese.
- Bring Internet regulations in China and East Turkestan into line with international guarantees of freedom to seek, receive and impart information, as contained in China's international and domestic obligations.
- Clarify the body of regulations governing online activity targeting Uyghurs according to international human rights standards so as to give a transparent framework for the permissible aspects of online expression in East Turkestan.
- Release immediately all Uyghur prisoners jailed for expressing opinions online that contradict state policies, especially webmasters and bloggers imprisoned after the July 5, 2009 unrest in Urumchi.
- Cease the conflation of peaceful dissent to government policies in East Turkestan with crimes punishable in China, such as rumor mongering, separatism, endangering state security and inciting ethnic hatred.
- Ensure equal online access for Han and Uyghur citizens in East Turkestan by investing in broadband coverage in more administrative villages at the same rate as coverage of *bingtuan* and urban areas, and expand mobile coverage.
- Halt the banning of websites which provide information in the Uyghur language and from Uyghur activists such as the websites of the Uyghur American Association, Uyghur Human Rights Project, World Uyghur Congress and Radio Free Asia.
- Stop blocking Uyghurbiz, which aims to encourage understanding between Han and Uyghur people, and allow it to operate in China.
- Discontinue the practice of filtering keywords relating to Uyghur people, and particularly to Uyghur history and religion.
- Cease blocking commentary by Uyghurs on film websites and other forums.
- End the censoring of major news stories concerning Uyghurs, and selectively allowing hate speech, particularly by Han netizens, which forms discriminatory impressions of Uyghurs amongst Han Chinese. Prosecute those who employ violent hate speech to attack Uyghurs online.
- Restore all deleted Uyghur sites, including Diyarim, Salkin, Xabnam and Orkhun, on their original domains.

- Enforce stricter “anti-discrimination” policies for Chinese corporations. These services should allow Uyghur people to sign up, post, and search their names just like Han people can. Do not allow Chinese tech companies to selectively deny Uyghur people from using Chinese social media, and from fully participating in these media.
- Reinstate the *doppa* festival, which is geared at encouraging cultural exchange, and allow online promotion of the festival.
- Stop promoting cyberattacks or sheltering the attackers who target Uyghur activists. Criminalize cyber-crimes within China.
- Cease forthwith any regional or localized shutdowns of the internet and allow citizen journalists among the Uyghur to report from on-the-ground about developing incidents in order to offer a balanced account of complex issues.
- End all discriminatory practices targeted at Uyghur users of Internet cafés in East Turkestan and in inland China.
- Use the Internet to promote the flourishing of a rich and diverse Uyghur intellectual atmosphere that enables Uyghurs to share information on their condition with others in China or overseas.
- Abide by Article 52 of the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law and Article 35 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, which guarantees freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration.
- Ratify the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights and implement the provisions protecting freedom of speech and association contained in Articles 19 and 22 through domestic law.
- Protect freedom of expression and association online outlined in the international standards contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 19 and 20
- Ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and implement Article 5 through domestic law.
- Abide by the standards outlined in United Nations resolution A/HRC/20/L.13, which specifically protects freedom of expression online.
- Meet obligations as set out in Article 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and obligations protecting women from discriminatory policies in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.
- Permit a visit from the Special Rapporteurs on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and on minority issues to investigate the condition of online freedom of speech in East Turkestan.

- Adopt the recommendations contained in the 2011 *Report of the Special Rapporteur to the General Assembly on the right to freedom of opinion and expression exercised through the Internet*, especially the measures covering access to content contained in paragraphs 81, 82 and 83.
- Adopt the measures contained in the 2011 *Report of the Special Rapporteur on key trends and challenges to the right of all individuals to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds through the Internet*, particularly the recommendations covering restriction of content on the Internet paragraphs 69 to 84
- Realize Article 1 of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and Article 2 of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.

For Concerned Governments:

- Raise the issue of Internet restrictions at bilateral human rights dialogues with the People’s Republic of China in such a way that does not devalue egregious human rights abuses in the face of “economic realities,” and call upon the Chinese government to ensure the genuine and meaningful consultation and participation of Uyghurs in effective online debate.
- Insist Chinese officials establish regulations governing the Internet that reflect international human rights standards guaranteeing Uyghurs enjoy the freedom to seek, receive and impart information online.
- Enact legislation to prohibit domestic companies from censoring content in China or selling technology to China that enables censorship.
- Open consulates in the East Turkestan regional capital of Urumchi that will permit a closer monitoring of human rights conditions in the region.
- Establish a “Special Coordinator for Uyghur Affairs” in national foreign ministries.
- Enact legislation expressing concern about the condition of freedom of speech and association online in East Turkestan, specifically condemning violations of Uyghur human rights in the strongest terms and asking the Chinese government to immediately stop all abuses.
- Pass a “Uyghur Policy Act” that incorporates protection of Uyghur freedom to seek, receive and impart information online, as well as mandates investigation of violations of Uyghurs’ fundamental rights to freedom of expression and association.
- Urge Chinese counterparts in meetings to abide by agreed international obligations that protect Uyghur human rights, to ensure a healthy and open Internet that permits discussion of complex Uyghur political, economic, social and cultural issues and to

release unconditionally political prisoners jailed for expressing peaceful dissent online.

For the International Community:

- Tighten monitoring mechanisms of the treaty bodies covering international human rights instruments in the United Nations system, especially in regard to the People's Republic of China's obligations to meet international standards on freedom of expression and association.
- Encourage international efforts to stop online censorship and work towards a comprehensive and enforceable UN instrument protecting the right of Internet users to freely seek, receive and impart information.
- Request the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to publicly express concern over the severe limitations placed on Uyghur freedom to seek, receive and impart information online and urge China to review and reform its body of regulations governing the Internet in order to meet international standards.
- Send observers, particularly the Special Rapporteurs on freedom of opinion and expression and on Minority Issues, to East Turkestan with unfettered access to Uyghur communities to impartially conduct an assessment of China's compliance to its international obligations to protect freedom of expression and association for minorities.
- Ensure human rights standards and obligations regarding freedom of expression and association are fully met by the Chinese government before multilateral assistance and projects, through agencies such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, are approved.

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Henryk Szadziewski, Senior Researcher, hszad@uhrp.org

Greg Fay, Project Manager, gregfay@uhrp.org

Phone: +1-202-478-1920

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The Uyghur American Association (UAA) works to promote the preservation and flourishing of a rich, humanistic and diverse Uyghur culture, and to support the right of the Uyghur people to use peaceful, democratic means to determine their own political future in East Turkestan.



The UAA launched the UHRP in 2004 to promote improved human rights conditions for Uyghurs and other indigenous groups in East Turkestan, on the premise that the assurance of basic human rights will facilitate the realization of the community's democratic aspirations.

UHRP also works to raise the profile of the Uyghur people and the plight of all “minority” peoples in East Turkestan by:

Researching, writing and publishing news stories and longer reports covering a broad range human rights issues involving civil and political rights, through to social cultural and economic rights;

Preparing briefings – either written or in person – for journalists, academics, diplomats and politicians on the human rights situation faced by the Uyghur people and others in East Turkestan.

<p>The Uyghur American Association</p>	<p>The Uyghur Human Rights Project</p>
<p>1420 K Street NW Suite 350</p>	<p>1420 K Street, NW Suite 350</p>
<p>Washington, DC 20005</p>	<p>Washington, DC 20005</p>
<p>Tel: (202) 478-1920; Fax: (202) 478-1910</p>	<p>Tel: (202) 478-1920; Fax: (202) 478-1910</p>
<p>www.uyghuramerican.org info@uyghuramerican.org</p>	<p>www.uhrp.org info@uhrp.org</p>