

Azerbaijan: Right Click

Multimedia reshapes domain registration and Internet access

Only five years ago the Azerbaijani Internet and Information Communications Technology (ICT) field were a mess. With a low educational level in the field, a strong state monopoly, a lack of institutional development, and the need for a structure for the dissemination of information to the public, these systems, while functioning, were not doing so efficiently. Osman Qunduzov, an office manager at a computer center in the Azerbaijan railway system, was so moved by the state of things that he made the radical decision to leave his job and establish and direct the NGO "Multimedia." With the establishment of this organization, Mr. Qunduzov hoped to make the Internet more transparent and accessible to the Azerbaijani people.

During the course of his work, Osman appealed to the Eurasia Foundation (EF) for funding to address what he felt were the two biggest barriers to free access to the

Internet: the monopoly of the Internet by government and private interests, and the control of the '.az.com' domain by the government alone. In response, EF gave a grant in 2001 of over \$14,000 to tackle these issues. With the support it received, Multimedia began to confront these troubles with several different strategies.

To begin with, Multimedia used EF funding to conduct a series of six seminars over a six-month period of time on the topic of domain registration fees. The organization invited representatives from many areas of Azerbaijani society: the Ministry of Education and Communication, Internet domain providers, representa-

tives from public and private sectors, universities, the Human Rights Resources Center, Project Harmony and the media. "The idea was perfect," said Faik Farmanov, general director of Intrans, one of Azerbaijan's largest Internet service providers, "to collect people together for the purpose of discussing and sharing opinions." Taking into account international standards regarding domain registration, participants of Multimedia's series of seminars were able to agree on a recommendation to reduce the fee charged for Web site registration from \$450 down to a much more affordable \$50. "Azerbaijan's registration

fees were really high because there were no established rules on Internet domains that could be used to reduce the fee," explained Osman, "and to complicate matters there were some companies that illegally sold domain registration."

While previously many

Azerbaijani sites were registered under '.com' or '.org' domains, these seminars have made it more fiscally possible for the Azerbaijani populace to create sites that reflect their concerns under the '.az' domain.

With regards to cost, however, there was another barrier that, when addressed by Multimedia, truly made Internet access more attainable in Azerbaijan. In the past, the price to connect to the Internet was simply too high for many individuals, about \$12 an hour. Recently, however, Multimedia aided in the negotiation to reduce this fee. Where users once had to pay \$5, this amount has been reduced to 75 cents. When the legislation came into effect on January 2003, it immediately increased the number of individuals able to afford access to the Internet. The current count of internet users is about 25,000 people, out of a population of almost 8 million.

These problems faced by the average Azerbaijani are further exacerbated by a language barrier. While the country officially adopted a Latin-based alphabet in 1991, this has not simplified internet usage. For example, the second largest city in this country, Gence, has a total of eleven different spellings, making locating information complicated. Worse, however, is the fact that many websites are not even written in Azeri, making them inaccessible to many.

Cognizant of the fact that their work could not remain limited to price issues, Multimedia began to address the issue of monopolies in relation to the Azerbaijani Internet. They made the strategic decision to establish a

"We made the decision to work together with the government to help solve Azerbaijan's Internet problems."

Osman Qunduzov, director of Multimedia



good relationship with the media in Azerbaijan. With the press behind them, they were able to campaign for public support and create wide-spread backing for having the '.az.com' domain controlled by more than one party. As a result of these efforts, the '.az.com' Internet domain is no longer managed solely by the government, but by Multimedia as well. It is Osman's opinion that this shift from a governmentally controlled domain was achieved by the heightened awareness of citizens about this problem, achieved through the collaboration of concerned parties and the press.

While battling over the '.az.com' domain, he was also struggling to prevent monopolization of private Internet providers' channels. A co-worker of Osman, Mirali Huseynov, praised his efforts in this field. "I think that Osman's work is helpful for the Baku community, and he needs more support and help from others to continue to manifest his ideas." As an extension of his current work, Osman hopes to create a municipal-based information system so that individuals outside the capital have access to important data they need.

Multimedia also addressed the problems of developing an Azerbaijani Internet infrastructure, as there was no ICT development policy in place. Given this fact, practically every company and individual had determined his or her own configuration. Multimedia asserted that a more developed infrastructure would, in itself, be a guard against monopolies. As such, it decided that a general site addressing the concerns of Internet development that was easily accessible to the Azerbaijani public was needed. Naturally, many problems have been encountered in forming Azerbaijan's Internet infrastructure. However, before Multimedia's intensive efforts, there was little expertise available to help navigate obstacles that occur in Internet development. "Citizens earnestly need to obtain information about the ICT field and its usage," Osman stressed, "and at the same time it is also necessary to analyze occurrences in this field and to deliver this information to the public." Now Multimedia's informational Web site is available to fulfill just that purpose, and functions in three languages; Azeri, Russian and English.

The organization also saw a pressing need to provide the public with information about Internet security. With EF's funding, it implemented its Web Site Domain Registration project, an undertaking designed to garner support for using international standards when determining Azerbaijan's Internet security and price structure. Before 1998, in addition to a lack of public awareness, there was no legislative act in support of individual Internet security in Azerbaijan. Multimedia started its own work on this topic and then published its findings on its Web site for public view. Certainly, its efforts are part of the reason that the current laws protecting Internet privacy in Azerbaijan exist.

Multimedia is currently working under the observation of the Internet Forum Social Union of Azerbaijan to further address security by creating an Internet Safety



Information Web Site Center. Its goal is to distribute information about important Internet security issues and to offer ways to address and solve these problems. The Web site answers commonly asked questions, such as how to guard against unauthorized access and changes to a Web site. This Internet Safety Web site, which continues to be controlled by Multimedia, is one of the few Azerbaijani-produced sources of this type of information. Thus, while designed to answer general questions on this topic, it also remains one of the few resources with Azerbaijan specific information.

Multimedia hopes to continue working by creating a public social Internet center and by continuing its efforts to correct Azerbaijan's Internet infrastructure problems under the guidelines of the National Strategy of ICT Development. Its work on the latter has already begun, with a project launched by the Azerbaijan government and the United Nations. Once a core group of individuals with the relevant ICT skills has been identified, Multimedia will work closely with that group through the year 2012 to address the problems encountered with the Internet infrastructure in Azerbaijan. In addition, it has begun using ICT for marketing research and use in the field of education.

Since the establishment of Multimedia in 1997 and its grant from EF in 2001, huge changes have taken place in the ICT field in Azerbaijan: monopolies have been eliminated, domain registration and Internet access fees have dropped dramatically, and large amounts of information regarding the ICT field have been posted on the Internet for the Azerbaijani populace's benefit. Determination and hard work on this organization's part greatly supported the implementation of these innovations. Where once chaos ruled, now, the beginnings of order can be displayed with just the click of a mouse.