



The Role of Social Media in Kazakhstani Journalism: New Traditions and Challenges

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Abstract

Kazakhstani journalism has some peculiarities based on deep-seated traditions and the state of the modern mass media system. New technologies have greatly influenced the mass media. In the last decade, the development of social media has questioned the role of journalists in the society, as well as the existing professional practices and norms. This article studies the main trends and forms of using social media by Kazakhstani journalists in the context of historical backgrounds, and sociocultural and political conditions of the development of Kazakhstani journalism.

Keywords: Kazakhstan; Society; Journalism; New technologies; New media; Social media; Blogs; Facebook; Twitter; LiveJournal

Received: May 05, 2017; **Accepted:** May 08, 2017; **Published:** May 18, 2017

Introduction

In Western democracies, journalists traditionally play the role of controllers of national governments – a substantial part of the presswork is to ensure public integrity – promoting the interests of the business elite. Traditionally, journalists exercise functions of information keepers and disseminators [1]. The work of a journalist comes down to gathering, analyzing, checking, editing and publishing the news. It is expected that a journalist is to be non-party (in order not to take somebody's side at public disputes) and accountable to readers, listeners, and viewers [2].

Kazakhstani journalism does not fit into the Western paradigm. It has some peculiarities conditioned by a long historical tradition of "serving the interests of the state" [3]: first, Kazakhstani media as an institute were established on the governmental initiative as a tool to inform, to manipulate and to control the society [4]; second, Kazakhstani journalism is directly connected with the literature – the most famous writers in Kazakhstan were well-known journalists (publicists) seeing themselves as "...educators and supporters of Kazakhstani culture development. Some of them worked as censors.

The Kazakhstani journalism [2] school ranks among the oldest in the USSR. Many scientists date the beginning of the contemporary history of Kazakhstani journalism to the 1920s [5]. During Soviet times, journalism acted as a governmental tool influencing the public consciousness and the existing practice in organizing socialist construction and political education [6]. According to Kozybaev [7], Soviet journalists played the role of state

propagandists and organizers cooperating with the government [8]. On the one hand, as a rule, journalists were members of the Communist Party and reproduced an official ideological discourse (propaganda); on the other hand, being a part of "the intellectual class" they had been always strongly connected with the Soviet public. It meant perfect moral values and obligations of a journalist to use his education, social and cultural background to develop the Soviet society [9].

According to Zassoursky [2], in 1970-1985 the role of a journalist in the society was rather "instrumental", but the situation changed with the beginning of the perestroika in 1986. At the end of the 1980s, they started politicization of the socio-political segment of Kazakhstani press. The perestroika enabled Kazakhstani journalists to easily express their opinions on different social issues, criticizing the government. In 1991-1995, journalists practically were "the fourth estate" in the country. But in 1996-2006 "...unbounded courage towards the local authorities was replaced by the pragmatic approach focused on periodicals survival under difficult economic conditions" [7]. The first years of independence were marked by a number of economical and political crises. In that period, journalists and editorial staff of Kazakhstani media lived under the constant threat of retirement, bankruptcy, forced mergers and takeovers.

Miller [10] underlines that a close alliance between the mass media and the government during the 1990s became the basis

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Citation: Bulatova M, Beisenkulov A. The Role of Social Media in Kazakhstani Journalism: New Traditions and Challenges. Global Media Journal. 2017, 15:28.

for the cooperation between the mass media, the business and the policy in the early 21st century. As old (national) values were squeezed out by new (market) norms in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, the role of journalists in the society was gradually balanced between state and market forces. On the one hand, journalism acquired a new function – to entertain the audience while promoting goods and services in the consumer manipulated market. On the other hand, being in a close alliance with political and economical groups, the mass media required from journalists to play the role of "PR workers". The media became a tool for spreading propaganda of culture, history, national interests [11].

The condition of Kazakhstani journalism is determined not only by traditions, but also by the specific features of the modern media model, which can be characterized as a unique "Eurasian hybrid model" or "statist commercial model" [12]. This model has some key characteristics. First, strong relations between the mass media, journalists and the state are appropriate to it. Second, these relations are enacted by the common belief – conscious or unconscious – in the regulatory/critical role of the state (or state bodies) "in conceptualizing the mass media" [12]. All above-mentioned facts impact the press freedom. As for freedom of the press, the situation in Kazakhstan can hardly be called enviable. The country was ranked the 175th among 197 states in the Freedom House rating.

Nevertheless, under such control "from above" Kazakhstani journalism does not deny common professional standards and quality.

Paradoxically, the modern Kazakhstani media system is presented by two main groups: the state-controlled mass media (mainly, TV channels) and more independent and disloyal to the political elite commercial mass media. They belong to private persons, parties or foreign corporations, and, in general, are subject to indirect state control. The mechanism of such influence is rather complicated, but one can underline three types of a state influence on Kazakhstani media (especially, TV): direct control (1), indirect control of state companies (2), as well as indirect control through the pressure on owners or media moguls (3), which can be based on personal relations between government officials and owners of the private mass media [13].

As of July 1, 2016, according to the Ministry of Information and Communication, there are 2763 active mass media registered in Kazakhstan. The majority – 86% – is print media, 11% – electronic media, 3% – information agencies.

Now, there are 1156 newspapers and 1269 magazines in the country. 285 electronic media are also registered, including 169 TV and radio companies (108 TV companies and 61 radio companies), 108 cable operators and 8 satellite service providers¹.

Information agencies total to 41. There are 15 online media in Russian and Kazakh. Officially, 85% of media are independent and only 15% are governmental².

In Kazakhstan there is a state order: the government allocates vast sums for state and some private media (in Kazakh) to cover the activity of the state authorities and social projects. For this purpose, the authorities allocate up to KZT 45 bln (app. \$132 mln) yearly.

A typical modern Kazakhstani journalist can be described as follows: 1) a young person (under 40), who most commonly cooperates with media companies, 2) gets a stable income, 3) realizes his creative ambitions outside his official place of work, for example, as a freelancer. Abramov [14] underlines that Kazakhstani journalists commonly share professional values of their Western colleagues. But there is an outside pressure, which some journalists describe as a special form of censorship.

Hanitzsch et al. [1] have analyzed a professional journalistic culture in 18 countries of the world and determined three different models of journalism: "Western journalism", "peripheral Western journalism" and "journalism of developed countries". Within this logic, the journalistic culture of Kazakhstan is included in the last group and characterized, among other things, by critical attitude towards changes in political and economic elites, emphasized willingness of journalists to broadcast a positive image of the political and business establishment of the country, and propensity of journalists to motivate citizens to participate in public activities and political discussions.

The development of the Internet has increased this tendency recently. The Internet as an open, safe, compatible and reliable platform serves as a basis for new media due to its ability to transfer data and information boundless. The growth and development of the Internet in combination with digital technologies is an important factor of journalists and media competitiveness.

The Internet provides new possibilities, which can change both journalism and a level of media influence on the society [15]. In Kazakhstan, the Internet is divided into "official" and "alternative". From a formal point of view, the Internet is relatively free from the state control; any person having the Internet access can criticize the government, the political system and other governmental issues.

Balance Between Journalism and Social Media

Nowadays, the profession of a journalist is deeply influenced by new technologies.

Advanced ICT enabled to transfer information from electronic to digital form. These forms of presentation of different audiovisual and multimedia information allow organizing the information production, storage and dissemination processes at a totally new level.

There is no uniform, universally acknowledged definition for new mass media so far. But many researchers come to the general characteristics of new media. First, they are "display-linked". Second, they offer a text, an audio and a video, both static and moving images, at the same time. New media are interactive in a varying degree. As it was mentioned by V.N.

¹Mapping Digital Media: Kazakhstan. A Report By The Open Society Foundations 29 March 2013.

² Europe and Eurasia Media Sustainability Index 2015, Kazakhstan.

Pavlenko, a representative of the magazine *Sovetnik* (Moscow), at the seminar Special Purpose New Media, new media is a term meaning the appearance of digital computer, information, network technologies and communications at the end of the 20th century. New mass media produce media products that are interactive and digitally disseminated [11].

Some Kazakh researchers think that there are no reasonable grounds to consider that new media can compete with the traditional mass media in the Republic [16]. Nevertheless, we do not share such confidence taking into account a world tendency of accelerated development of new media.

The enormous potential of the Internet enables the online media to enjoy superiority on many parameters, as geography of the audience is almost not limited, except by the accessibility of the Internet. One can notice a boost of Internet users in Kazakhstan. According to the Ministry of Information and Communication of the RK, by 2016 there were more than 10 mln web users in the country (it is more than 50% of population in the country). 35% of Kazakhstanis are active web users.

In the expanding media scene, the press, the analogue radio and TV are accepted as "old" media. New information channels and information itself, based on digitisation, are determined as "new media". Another definition describes new media as "digital communication channels, in which a text, graphic and moving images, an audio are presented in one 'package' and which have different forms of production, dissemination, reception and storage of the end product" [17].

The change in the communication character became a peculiar feature of new mass media. It is difficult to distinguish mass and personal communication forms, mass and non-mass media. The usage of new media has and will have more individual character. The "demassification" process takes place. New media expand communication capabilities. New electronic media offer interactive communication between a user and a producer, as well as a content disseminator. New mass media provide an opportunity for interpersonal communication [18].

Forced merger of editorial staffs, multi-publishing activities, multi-skilling increase a workload of journalists taking into account difficulties with functioning of modern media, including the dependency on the state social order, owners, financial and industrial groups, business as an advertiser. A journalist of a convergent publication is time-limited and is not able to study a problem thoroughly.

New needs of the audience, which at the moment has vast possibilities to set up a content and to increase its interactivity, impact the traditionally secret professional journalistic practice based on the system of editorial control [19].

Professional journalism problems have deepened since the first decade of the 21st century, when "new" or web-media started their development towards Web 2.0.

The appearance of social media increased the capability of people to interact with mass media and to cooperate by creating user content and citizen journalism. This up-to-date interactions

are implemented and entwined with mass media: the relations between journalists and the audience/citizens today can be called "symbiotic". Social media challenge the role of a journalist and the old journalistic practice and professional culture. Now, when each person can both consume and "collect, annotate and, if needed, ensure recirculation of media content by new effective technologies" [20], professional journalists face the necessity to apply new means in order to grip the audience while generating media content without loss of control over consumers.

Hedman and Djerf-Pierre [21] underline three groups of journalists, which use social media: 1) nonusers (and even opponents), who avoid social media, 2) "pragmatic conformists", who use social media regularly (but selectively) influenced by industrial tendencies and professional requirements, 3) "enthusiastic activists", as a rule, young journalists, who live in the Internet being almost continuously connected to the blogosphere.

Social media become an important tool for a professional journalistic work both at the institutional level (media agencies presented in social media) and the individual level (journalists). First of all, it can be connected to information search, collection, transfer and check. Social media ensure online cooperation in news checking and a new way of crowdsourcing while collecting and analyzing information to prepare journalistic stories.

Social media are used for communication, for example, with the media audience [11], for feedback and dialogues with readers/viewers, information sources, for professional discussions with colleagues, etc. Media companies and journalists can execute marketing events and branding by means of social media.

In the nearest 10-15 years or more, the traditional media will be in priority in the media market, but publications that will prefer to work in an old concept are likely to cease to exist. In spite of skepticism, among the state bodies and the mass media inclusive, the offered development line can result in a huge consolidation of proactive civil intellectual wealth of the country, tradition for solving adversary and urgent issues by dialogues, balancing the interests and effective actions on problems.

Issues of the Research

The above conclusions raise a number of scientific questions connected with the issue of how the usage of social media by Kazakhstani journalists can influence the society and a special role of a journalist in the society. In this research, we have raised two questions:

1. How do Kazakhstani journalists use social media with professional purposes?
2. Do social media influence the professional role of journalists in the society?

Methods and Sampling

This research was carried out in two stages.

The first stage included the study of 50 blogs of Kazakhstani journalists registered in LiveJournal. Blogs were selected by monitoring media web-sites, Google, Yandex, author's personal

contacts and the LiveJournal search engine. We polled journalist-bloggers by the LiveJournal messenger. Journalists were asked how they use LiveJournal for professional purposes. The feedback was 98 answers.

At the second stage, we have conducted anonymous depth interviews with 21 Kazakhstani journalists to better understand the results of the poll. Journalists were asked about the role and benefits of social media (Twitter, Facebook, blogs) in their professional activity. In spite of some limitations, we think that this research makes it possible to give definite answers on the following questions: how Kazakhstani journalists use social media and which factors influence the forms of use of social media.

Results

The results have shown that in general pollees use social media for their professional work rather actively (**Table 1**). As it was expected, the number of so called "pragmatic conformists" and "enthusiastic activists" is higher among young journalists.

To a certain extent, these results prove an opinion that "...for today the traditional media have become rather 'a cemetery' for some once promising Kazakhstani journalists of middle-aged and older generation..."

The bloggers' age (40 years) is explained by the fact that the Kazakhstani youth, as a rule, is the main cohort of popular online services and sites of social media. But it would be simple to explain the results only by "the age-related conservatism". Allocation of preferences between different social media platforms makes it possible to discuss a definite model of using social media by journalists (**Table 2**).

Facebook is the most preferable online networking service among the polled journalists: 62% of respondents use it at least once per day. The frequency of using Twitter by Kazakhstani journalists is well below – 23%. 25% of polled journalists use another social networking websites for professional purposes. These results are partially confirmed by the statistics of using social networks by the Kazakhstani Internet audience.

Speaking about "the other social networks", first of all, we mean extremely popular social networks Odnoklassniki and VKontakte. According to TNS Central Asia, the daily Kazakhstani audience of VKontakte amounted to 5.8 mln unique authors per month.

Rather high activity in the blogosphere is a peculiarity of using social media by Kazakhstani journalists. They are active enough in reading and writing some blogs. Thus, 72% read blogs at least once per day. 21% of respondents make notes in personal blogs daily or even more often.

As it was already mentioned, Kazakhstani journalism is connected with the literature. Modern Kazakhstani journalism differs from journalism in democratic cultures as it is "literature-oriented" and has a tendency towards personification [8]. Blogging has become an appropriate style for those journalists, who are traditionally inclined to writing long texts, communication with the audience in a periphrastic manner, and the use of illustrations [11]. These

peculiarities of Kazakhstani journalism are illustrated in the following answer of a LiveJournal journalist blogger:

"Our people need a wide [...] open space to publish their immortal masterpieces. They also need unlimited spaces for blogging, to make notes, to comment something, to publish news and updates of their friends" [blogger, LiveJournal, men's magazine editor].

In fact, journalists try to use the advantages of each service. Blogging is preferable for long texts; Twitter with 140 characters is better for short dynamic news, etc. Anonymous depth interviews enable to identify different models of using social media platforms for professional activity:

"I prefer LiveJournal and Facebook. All my materials-texts-I publish in these online social networks regularly. I also have an account in Twitter, but there are only 500 followers there, so I use it not so often" [blogger, 37 years, journalist, freelancer, cooperates with the newspaper *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*].

"I often write in VKontakte; as a rule, with this social network I search for people that are needed for my work. I also have a blog in LiveJournal, but, in a whole, this service is not so important for me at the moment, that's why I do not update it on a regular basis" [blogger, 27 years, journalist, editor of an online magazine].

"I prefer Facebook. There I publish my materials, have dialogues with the audience and add some people to my friends. Inadequate comments are extremely rare. I don't like inland social networks like Odnoklassniki and VKontakte" [blogger, 55 years, journalist, editor-in-chief of an online magazine, correspondent].

The interviews have shown that social media are often used by journalists to publish the socio-political content. 40% of respondents take part in socio-political discussions held in blogs. Besides, Kazakhstani journalists try to earn in social media, PR and advertising (**Table 3**).

High journalistic activity in a socio-political discourse is easily explained by the peculiarity of the Kazakhstani public sphere. The Internet in Kazakhstan to some extent replaces "kitchen talks". According to Gatov [11], the Kazakhstani blogosphere has become a disputing core, including a larger part of the public discourse on

Table 1. Use of social media for professional purposes (once or twice a day) (% respondents).

Age	Age		
	<40	40–55	>55
Use for professional purposes	81	72	39
Use (total)	76		
Number of answers in each group	341	117	36
Number of answers in sampling	500		

Table 2. Social media in professional activity (daily).

Usage of social media, %	
Blog reading	72
Blogging	21
Facebook	62
Twitter	23
Other social networking services	25

Table 3. Interview results.

	Purpose	% Respondents		
		FB	Tw	Blogs
1	Search for new ideas	81	60	73
2	Search for information for investigative journalism	71	66	78
3	Audience feedback	76	53	41
4	Communication with colleagues	82	48	33
5	Content publication apart from a key job	63	40	51
6	Audience extension, publicity stunt	69	51	40
7	Building of media brand awareness (employer)	60	45	25
8	Professional discussion	64	32	37
9	Advertising earnings	21	14	15
10	Discussion of social and economical points of interest	68	40	40
	Number of answers	367	248	344

political and social issues. The respondents have proved a role of blogs for socio-political discussions:

"I think that it is a habit to use blogs. A blog provides a possibility to express yourself, to share your thoughts with a huge audience. This is the possibility to be a part of the society, to have your area to express your opinion and view. There is no censorship in blogs. But I have accounts both in Twitter and Facebook. A blog is a tool to publish and to transmit information that will be open and available for everybody" [blogger, 46 years, freelancer].

Content publication in social media apart from the key job is also popular among Kazakhstani journalists. As it was already mentioned, Kazakhstani mass media and, first of all, national TV channels are state-controlled [22]. This control (supervision) takes a form of censorship, which can be also presented as editorial policy and self-censorship. It has a negative influence on journalists' work.

Besides, Kazakhstani journalists use blogs to overcome editorial constraints. The respondents told how they use social media as additional tools:

"I started blogging, because there are things that will not be published in the newspaper, where I work, but I feel it is necessary to discuss them in public [...], when I want to attract public attention and to give publicity to some facts, problems or inform the authorities, I just write a message in the blog. In 90% of cases, a message becomes noticeable [...] and is widely discussed [...]. It is clear that regional or local authorities monitor the information and discussions..." [blogger, 42 years, online-newspaper zona.kz] [23-26].

"What should a sideliners do, if he wants to write about a film? He should create a blog and write there as much as he wants. I work in some mass media. One gives me the possibility to keep a blog on its site. But it is only one of my three blogs" [blogger, freelancer].

Blogging also creates the earning potential, especially for freelancers:

"A blog has become a part of the media scene, and if my materials are worth reading, sometimes they are accepted (and paid) by the mainstream online media. In my work I care

about some questions: is the text good or bad, interesting and not interesting... The term 'the text does not fit the conventions' drives me crazy. Today, in journalism it is possible to work with no middlemen involved. If you work and write well, you will make a decent living" [blogger, freelancer, 40 years, cooperates with online media, radio and national newspapers].

It would be logical to assume that Kazakhstani journalists use social media mainly for publishing profit-making content outside usual work: in fact, they consider Facebook, Twitter and blogs as a tool "to earn money by advertisement or PR".

Conclusions

Nowadays, current and truthful information and high quality dissemination channels are of great importance. Kazakhstan, where religious, labour, social and political contradictions manifest themselves more and more intensively, constitutes no exception. Taking into account forecasts for changes in internal and external policies, and the socio-economic situation in the years to come, we think that it is necessary to speak about quality transformation of one of key participants of public communications – local media and their role.

Kazakhstani journalism, professional practices and norms have been always influenced by the relations of journalists with information sources and the audience. Journalism has been never isolated from the society, but social media made this cooperation more intense. Journalists are to adapt to new environment finding different ways of using social media.

Journalists in Kazakhstan try "to normalize" the use of social media; they integrate social media into their old practices and use them as new tools to get ideas, to conduct investigations, to check facts, to contact with the audience and to disseminate the author's content. In this regard, Kazakhstani journalists do not differ from their foreign colleagues. At that, the research has shown sufficient peculiarities in the use of social media by Kazakhstani journalists- differences that can be related to some reasons.

The use of social media platforms by journalists can be related to the fact that in Kazakhstan a journalist is a new profession in the whole. The difference is marked, when using blogs on such platforms as LiveJournal. More than 50% of Kazakhstani journalists told that they use blogs to publish non-commercial content, beside usual work, and 25% told that they write in their personal blogs every day.

The use of blogs by Kazakhstani journalists fits into literature traditions of journalism: opinions and discussions are the most important. This tradition of Kazakhstani intellectuals reaches new areas in blogs. The reason can be the specific understanding of journalism.

Social media offer an alternative public sphere, where journalists can write and discuss socio-political issues at the same time in compliance with the Kazakhstani tradition.

Blogs indicate the move away from the traditional neutral position of journalists. A journalist is a person who searches

for information for the public, prepares and disseminates it, but Kazakhstani journalists understand journalism deeper and more extensively. That's why they understand journalism as "a defender of national interests, national values". Thus, Kazakhstani journalism is closely related to the policy. A journalist can be both a public figure and a patriot. The reason why journalists undertook a mission of patriots originates from the period when Kazakhstan acquired the independence. Blogging "personifies" journalism. A blog concept is compared to the classic journalistic genres-a column, an essay and a report- it falls within literature-centrist, personified specific features of Kazakhstani journalism, being formed within decades.

Malpractice of journalists and bloggers, who are ready to meet unusual and new challenges, is a major concern today. Kazakhstani bloggers are commercially oriented.

It is safe to say that the Internet and mass media internetization in Kazakhstan have attached completely new importance to the place and the role of a journalist in the socio-political and socio-economical life of the country. A blog is an important platform for political opposition, and blogging can really influence the political

life in Kazakhstan (that is, online activity promotes activity in the off-line mode). All this factors consistently get connected to the social media theory, according to which the "passive" audience is replaced with the "active" one (unpredictable and uncontrolled). As for journalists, nowadays to keep own blogs and pages is an alternative to traditional journalism, especially for those journalists that work in state publications.

In spite of strengthening the governmental control of Internet communications in recent years, this new public spheres provide journalists with new professional scenes. Today, social media create a system of horizontal communications in the society with the strong traditional vertical of power and control over communications. In the long term, it can change the professional role of Kazakhstani journalists providing them with more independence with regard to the authorities. Regardless of the existing skepticism, among the state bodies and the mass media inclusive, the offered line of development can result in higher consolidation of proactive civil intellectual resources of the country, traditional settlement of adversary and critical issues by dialogue, balance of interests and productive activities while solving problems.

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