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Bloggers and the state: effectiveness or opposition

Abstract. *Despite the fact that the need for more use of social networks is growing, it is difficult for government agencies to communicate with the public. On the other hand, individual Internet users quickly gain hundreds of thousands of subscribers on social networks. The article gives a data analysis of how people in Kazakhstan use social networks and empirical studies of what bloggers, journalists, and editors do. It also gives the expert interviews of press secretaries, press officers, and press attachés of state bodies as a counterpoint. By «virtual battle,» the authors mean the complex relationship between bloggers, journalists, and representatives of government agencies and their press services. State institutions need to apply modern methods, approaches, and formats to the information and ideological work of the state. Now we live in a different society – nothing can be hidden from prying eyes. The Internet and social networks react much faster than the official authorities.*

Keywords: *Bloggers, government agencies, media, press office, press officers.*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32523/2616-7174-2022-141-4-15-22>

1. Introduction

1.1 The state of internet and social media consumption in Kazakhstan

Thanks to social networks and digitalization, the world is facing tectonic changes in the relationship between the state and the population, and the issue of people's trust in the authorities remains extremely important. According to him, the press services of state bodies, which are designed to anticipate and respond in a timely manner to the needs of the public, have been working on the information platform of

traditional media for a long time. They didn't have to answer the queries of individual readers and viewers. But society is changing, information technologies are developing, people are reading newspapers and watching TV channels less and less, and the Internet is taking their place. This trend will continue, and we will not be able to resist it.

Datareportal [1] estimates that 4.7 billion individuals, or 59% of the world's population, utilize social networks on a regular basis out of a total population of 7.98 billion. According to statistics for the entire world, the typical

Table 1

The number of active users of the Internet and social networks in the world	
The population of the planet	7.98 billion
Active users of social networks	4.7 billion
The average time a person uses the Internet	6 hours 49 minutes a day
The average time a person uses social networks	2 hours and 29 minutes

Table: Koshkenov • Source: DataReportal • Created with Datawrapper

individual uses the Internet for 6 hours and 49 minutes each day, with 2 hours and 29 minutes of that time being spent on social media. 52 percent of users specifically use the internet to stay up to speed on news and happenings (Table 1). Social network users who are actively using them climbed by 227 million throughout the course of the year.

1.2 Internet use in Kazakhstan

In January 2022, there were 16.41 million internet users in Kazakhstan. In Kazakhstan, 85.9% of the population has access to the internet as of the beginning of 2022. According to a Kepios [2] analysis, there were 184 thousand (+1.1%) more internet users in Kazakhstan between 2021 and 2022. To put things in perspective, these user statistics show that 2.68 million individuals in Kazakhstan were not online at the beginning of 2022, which translates to 14.1% of the total population.

The main gadget with which users receive news from online channels is a smartphone.

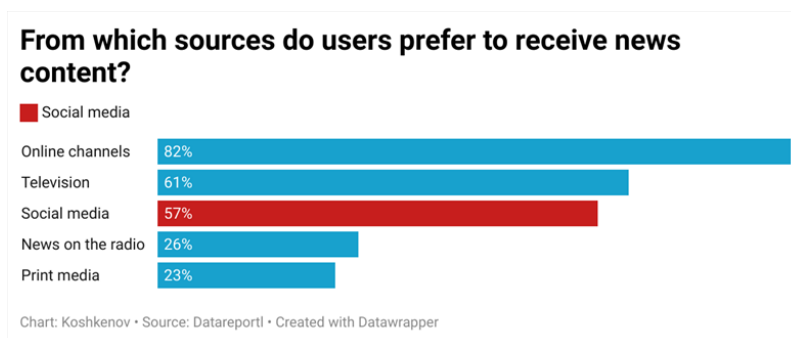
Only 42% of respondents use a computer for this purpose, and 16% use a tablet. For 64% of the population aged 18 to 24, and 63% of the population aged 25 to 34, social networks are a source of news. For the age range of 35–44 years, this indicator is only slightly lower—61%. For the following age groups, 45–54 years and 55–64 years, social networks act as a news channel for 57% and 49%, respectively.

The researchers analyzed which sources users now prefer to receive news content from. 82% choose various online channels for this, 61% choose television, 57% consume news content from social networks, 26% listen to news on the radio, and 23% choose print media (Figure 1).

2. Methodology

In the article, the authors used such research methods as expert interviews, questionnaires, and observation. As well as a comparative analysis of data from five years ago with current data, comparing data from 2017 with 2022.

Figure 1



3. The state of some popular social media in Kazakhstan

In Kazakhstan, there were 13.80 million active users of social media in January 2022. Although 72.3% of the population in Kazakhstan used social media as of January 2022, it is vital to keep in mind that these users may not all be distinct individuals (see our detailed notes on the data to learn why). According to a Kepios investigation, between 2021 and 2022, the number of social media users in Kazakhstan rose by 1.8 million (+15.0 percent).

The most popular social network as a news platform is Facebook, which is chosen as a source of up-to-date information by 44% of users who participated in the DataReportal survey. The next most popular are YouTube with 30%, WhatsApp with 22%, and Instagram with 17%. TikTok as a source of news is used by 7% of respondents, while Telegram is used by 6%.

3.1 Facebook users

By 2017, more than 4 million Facebook accounts had been created in Kazakhstan[3] alone, states Mike Kujawski, managing partner and senior consultant at the Center of Excellence for Public Sector Marketing in Canada (CEPSM) [4]. Although, according to his calculations, the actual viable accounts in Kazakhstan may be much smaller, according to his data, active users of this social network are estimated at 3.10 million people. However, at the beginning of 2022, Facebook had 2.30 million users in Kazakhstan, according to information provided on Meta advertising resources. Meta has made a lot of changes to its basic audience statistics for Facebook, which will be done by the end of 2021. It has also made a lot of changes to how its advertising tools give data about how many people they reach.

According to the updated statistics of the company's audience, at the beginning of 2022, Facebook advertising coverage in Kazakhstan was equal to 12.0 percent of the total population of the country. However, Facebook only allows users 13 and older to use its platform; it is also worth noting that in Kazakhstan, 16.2% of the «eligible» population uses Facebook as of 2022.

For more context, in Kazakhstan in January 2022, Facebook advertising coverage was equal to 14.0% of all Internet users there, regardless of age. Starting in 2022, 52.2 percent of Kazakhstan's Facebook advertising audience will be women, while 47.8 percent will be men.

3.2 Instagram users

According to statistics from Meta's advertising tools, there were 11.75 million Instagram users in Kazakhstan at the beginning of 2022. However, Instagram only allows users 13 and older to access its platform, so knowing that 82.7 percent of Kazakhstan's «eligible» population will be using Instagram in 2022 is important. It is also important to note that at the beginning of 2022, Instagram's ad reach in Kazakhstan amounted to 71.6% of the country's internet population (regardless of age). In Kazakhstan, 57.1 percent of Instagram's ad viewers were women, compared to 42.9 percent of men.

3.3 TikTok users

According to statistics found in ByteDance's marketing materials, 7.26 million adults in Kazakhstan used TikTok as of the beginning of 2022. Although ByteDance's advertising tools let advertisers target TikTok advertisements to users 13 and older, they only provide audience information for users 18 and over. ByteDance's statistics reveal that at the beginning of 2022, 57.1 percent of all adults in Kazakhstan who were 18 or older had access to TikTok advertisements. At the start of the year, TikTok's ad reach in Kazakhstan represented 44.2 percent of all local internet users, regardless of age. Early in 2022, women made up 54.1% of TikTok's audience in Kazakhstan, while men made up 45.9%.

4. Discussion

4.1 Cases of virtual battles: the power of bloggers

Mayrash Taikenova, Advisor to the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2017, believes that the state bodies of the former Soviet Union countries are used to working in a more private and closed mode, censoring all information intended for society.

In her opinion, the Internet and social networks force the press services of state bodies to work more openly and promptly to interact with the public. She is also sure that the press services of state bodies are actively present on social networks; they have some experience, although sometimes it is difficult for them to react to negative information. The information attack on this ministry included not only active social network users criticizing some of the ministry's plans, but also the spread of fake documents and rumors.

For example, Internet users proposed to bring to justice the former head of the Ministry, Yerlan Sagadiyev, for allegedly issuing an order according to which subjects such as "Kazakh language," "Kazakh literature," and "history of Kazakhstan" are excluded in educational institutions and "ABC Book" and "Ancient Kazakh History" are removed from the school curriculum. As a result, the minister had to make a video appeal to citizens and refute false information. The official website of the ministry was attacked by hackers. Mayrash Taikenova asserts that it might be challenging to deal with unpleasant remarks when you are aware that they are part of an order because of the strong effect that customers, the general public, commenters, bots, and trolls have. And in order to be properly prepared, you need to be aware of useful tools and trends.

Although Murat Abenov, Chairman of the Consumer Rights Protection Coalition of the Republic of Kazakhstan, believes that currently public opinion is formed not by journalists but by public activists and groups that effectively use social networks, he argues that regarding all recent events that caused a public outcry, public opinion was created not by the media but by social network activists. For example, Abenov wrote a post about how a fancy restaurant in the «Moscow» business center was disturbing the quiet of Astana residents at night. Three hours later, he got a response from the mayor of Astana through Facebook, and the problem was quickly fixed. According to the blogger, recently, none of the topics in the media have caused resonance or debate in society. Due to the lack of trust in the press, traditional media have lost their

leverage. The situation has changed radically. Social networks are now a powerful tool for the dissemination and acceptance of information.

Only in 2017, with 39 thousand subscribers, he was more popular than many Kazakh government agencies on social networks. The blogger also enjoys influence on Twitter, where he now has 94.8 thousand regular readers. He also has 63,800 followers on Instagram, where Kazakhstan's state institutions are poorly represented. Nonetheless, state institutions have gained traction in this area in recent years. For example, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan[5] currently has 160 thousand subscribers on Facebook and 141 thousand subscribers on Instagram. But there are currently 10,000 subscribers on the Facebook page of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Kazakhstan[6]. Abenov's Facebook page now has about 64 thousand subscribers.

4.2 Government agencies are advancing

Almost all ministries and other state institutions have pages on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, which are filled with information about past events and meetings of heads of state bodies. In Table 2, it can be clearly seen that even though the government is trying to learn how to use social networks, some individual users are ahead of them. We suppose that the press services of government agencies don't always use new tools and don't have the skills they need. Because of this, they need training in digital technologies and should change how they feel about social networks.

Press officers of state bodies recognize that they need to improve their skills in working with social networks. The press secretary of the akim of the Karaganda region in 2017 admitted that if the issue of coverage of the activities of state bodies in traditional media is regulated by a state order (publication of paid information materials in these media), then not all aspects are configured within social networks because not everything is clear and there is no culture of behavior in social networks. It may be considered that press officers are able to cooperate with the media based on the surveys. But they face difficulties in critical situations occurring on social networks.

Table 2

Comparison of the number of subscribers of state agencies and Murat Abenov on Facebook in 2017 and 2022

A comparison of the number of subscribers of state agencies and Murat Abenov on Facebook in 2017 and 2022		
Facebook page	2017	2022
Murat Abenov	39,000	64000
Press office of the President of Kazakhstan	31,000	76000
Prime Minister's Website	18,600	55000
Prosecutor General's Office	11,700	23000
Ministry of Defense	9,600	the page does not exist
Ministry of Labor and Social Protection	570	10000

Table: Koshkenov • Source: Facebook • Created with Datawrapper

In 2022, there was a large-scale training of government agency representatives to improve their social network competence. Employees of the press services of various ministries, government agencies, and akimats received comprehensive training on maintaining a page on social networks and studied the intricacies of SMM. The training was conducted by experts from Georgia. Of course, this is not the only event to improve the skills of employees responsible for the promotion of government agencies on social networks. From time to time, press officers improve their knowledge in the field of social media. Perhaps this has also contributed to the active development of state institution pages in social networks in recent years.

This paper shows that, compared to 2017, the official social media pages of government agencies have progressed quite well in 2022, interacting with a large number of followers. For example, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (formerly the Ministry of Education and Science) now has 160,000 subscribers, and hundreds of users respond to each of its posts. Askhat Aimagambetov, the former Minister of Education, has 61500 subscribers and approximately 5,000 Facebook friends. This is close to the indicators of Murat Abenov. The Ministry of Health of the Republic of Kazakhstan has 75,000 subscribers on Facebook.

This is also the top indicator. The Minister of Higher Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Sayasat Nurbek, who has 22 thousand followers on Facebook, has become one of the most influential people in social networks.

The government is not going to abandon the state information order. On the contrary, the sphere of influence of state information policy will expand, and the amount of payment for the placement of state propaganda will increase. In April 2021, it was reported that Kazakhstan's Ministry of Information and Public Development requested nearly 242 billion tenge from the budget over five years to implement the state information policy. Total expenditures under the budget program "Implementation of the state information policy": 2020: 50 130 577 tenge; 2021: 56 923 779 tenge; 2022: 56 221 515 tenge; 2023: 44 127 512 tenge; 2024: 34 470 631 tenge. According to the Public Foundation «Legal Media Center»[7], it is proposed to pay 3,337,500 tenge for video podcasts in social networks lasting from 20 to 60 minutes and 3,274,400 tenge for vines (duration is not specified). Web series (from 20 to 60 minutes): 14,410,000 tenges; Instagram series (20–60 seconds): 5,521,600 tenges. Instagram and Facebook stories: 42 thousand tenge. The state will estimate the production and placement of posts on the pages of popular bloggers at 495 thousand tenge. Payment for a unit of production

is everywhere. The dependence of the media on government orders and the inability of government agencies to work in the new Internet realities negatively affect people's trust in them, says Omirzhan Abdikhalyk, editor-in-chief of the popular Internet portal arasha.kz. He believes that the lack of openness, flexibility, and the right tools for the press services to respond makes it easier for the public to feel disconnected from state institutions. This makes people doubt important state decisions and can even lead to social protests.

One example of this phenomenon was the discussion that arose in social networks around land reform. On March 30, 2016, the Minister of National Economy, Yerbolat Dosayev, announced that, from July 1 of that year, 1.7 million hectares of agricultural land would be put up for auction. At first, this caused discontent on social networks, especially Facebook, which eventually resulted in calls for protest rallies. Protest actions were held in several cities in Kazakhstan. As a result, the President of Kazakhstan announced a moratorium on some norms of the Land Code, and some high-ranking officials were dismissed. The government of the Republic of Kazakhstan has criticized the information and educational activities of state bodies to explain the rules of citizen registration as a result of the negative reaction on social media.

5. Conclusion

In our opinion, every state institution needs to apply modern methods, approaches to the information and ideological work of the state, and new formats for submitting information. In the society we live in today, nothing is safe from inquisitive eyes. The state authorities are often slower to respond than the Internet and social networks. Despite the

significant progress Kazakhstan has made in the development of information society and e-government, the potential of social networks in public administration is not fully implemented, according to media trainer Asiya Akisheva. State institutions are wary of new media. For example, the Ministry of Information and Communications of Kazakhstan elaborated a memo for employees of government agencies and state-owned institutions on operations on the Internet, including social networks and blog platforms, consisting of prohibitions and recommendations.

When there are strict rules about what you can and cannot do on the Internet while also having to keep up with the times, many civil servants simply avoid giving out their real information and use different names on social networks. Yerzhan Baitana, who used to be the press officer for Kazakhstan's Ministry of Religious Affairs and Civil Society, doesn't try to hide the fact that he uses fake accounts to get the information out. He believes that social networks are mainly used for state propaganda. The societies of post-Soviet countries are reluctant to trust the authorities. Therefore, the representative of the state agency has to use bots. According to the expert, there is not a strong need to train press officers in new skills and technologies. Instead, it would be enough to make Kazakhstan's civil service system open and easy for people to use and to get rid of any artificial restrictions and barriers. The increase in Internet users and social media activists, the competition between government agencies and bloggers on social networks, and the growth of what can be done with new technologies all force the government to find new ways to work with and compromise with society. According to the study by ACT Kazakhstan, 70% of Kazakhstan residents already use social networks, and researchers predict their continued growth.

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Блогерлер және мемлекет: ықпалдылығы немесе қайшылығы

Аңдатпа. Әлеуметтік медианы көбірек пайдалану қажеттілігі артып келе жатқанына қарамастан, мемлекеттік органдар қоғаммен қарым-қатынасын арттыруы кейде қиынға соғады. Екінші жағынан алып қарағанда, жеке интернет қолданушылары әлеуметтік желілерде жүздеген мың оқырмандары мен жазылушыларын тез жинайды. Мақалада Қазақстандағы адамдардың әлеуметтік желілерді қалай пайдаланатыны туралы деректерге талдау жасалып, блогерлер, журналистер мен редакторлардың арақатынасы жайлы эмпирикалық зерттеулер келтірілген. Сондай-ақ, контрпункт ретінде баспасөз хатшыларының, баспасөз қызметі қызметкерлерінің және мемлекеттік органдардың баспасөз аттасөсінің сараптамалық сұхбаттары келтіріледі. «Виртуалды шайқас» деп авторлар блогерлер, журналистер және мемлекеттік органдар мен олардың баспасөз қызметтерінің өкілдері арасындағы күрделі қарым-қатынасты білдіреді. Мемлекеттік институттар мемлекеттің ақпараттық және идеологиялық жұмысына заманауи әдістерді, тәсілдер мен форматтарды қолдануы қажет. Қазір біз басқа қоғамда өмір сүріп жатырмыз – ешнәрсе нағардан тыс қалмайды әрі интернет пен әлеуметтік медиа ресми билікке қарағанда тезірек әрекет етеуде.

Түйін сөздер: блогерлер, мемлекеттік мекемелер, БАҚ, баспасөз қызметі, баспасөз хатшылары.

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Блогеры и государство: действенность или противостояние

Аннотация. Несмотря на то, что потребность в более активном использовании социальных сетей растет, государственным учреждениям сложно общаться с общественностью. С другой стороны, отдельные интернет-пользователи быстро набирают сотни тысяч подписчиков в социальных сетях. В статье приводится анализ данных о том, как люди в Казахстане используют социальные сети, и эмпирические исследования того, что делают блогеры, журналисты и редакторы. В качестве контраргумента приводятся экспертные интервью пресс-секретарей, сотрудников пресс-служб и пресс-атташе государственных органов. Под «виртуальной битвой» авторы подразумевают сложные взаимоотношения между блогерами, журналистами, представителями государственных органов и их пресс-службами. Государственным институтам необходимо применять современные методы, подходы и форматы в информационной и

идеологической работе государства. Сейчас мы живем в другом обществе – ничто не может быть скрыто от посторонних глаз. Интернет и социальные сети реагируют гораздо быстрее, чем официальные власти.

Ключевые слова: блогеры, государственные учреждения, СМИ, пресс-служба, сотрудники пресс-службы.

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