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# ОНЛАЙН-АУДИТОРИИ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ И КАЗАХСТАНА: ВЫБОР И ПРЕДПОЧТЕНИЯ В ЭПОХУ МУЛЬТИМЕДИЙНЫХ НОВОСТЕЙ

*В статье представлены результаты исследования, целью которого было выяснить, какие медиаплатформы используются онлайн-аудиториями в Центральной Азии и Казахстане для доступа к новостям, насколько активны казахстанские пользователи в Интернете и какой новостной контент их больше всего интересует. В основе статьи – результаты масштабного исследования, проведенного Институтом освещения войны и мира (IWPR) в 2019 г. в четырех странах: Казахстане, Кыргызстане, Узбекистане и Таджикистане. Всего было опрошено 4 130 человек, в том числе медиаэксперты. Использовался метод онлайн-исследования, при котором респонденты отбирались среди пользователей Интернета в режиме реального времени. Исследование показало, что онлайн-потребители новостного контента в Казахстане используют социальные сети и мессенджеры чаще, чем в других странах Центральной Азии. Было обнаружено, что для получения оперативной новостной информации пользователи в странах Центральной Азии предпочитают социальным сетям традиционные СМИ. При этом казахстанцы не обращают внимания на источник информации, что способствует распространению фейковых новостей и манипулированию общественным сознанием. Выявлено, что онлайн-новости экономики, культуры, экологии и других сфер человеческой деятельности остаются неинтересными для казахстанских пользователей.*

***Ключевые слова:*** *социальные сети, новости, онлайн-аудитория, Интернет.*

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## ONLINE AUDIENCES OF CENTRAL ASIA AND KAZAKHSTAN: CHOICE AND PREFERENCES IN THE ERA OF MULTIMEDIA NEWS CONTENT

*This article presents the results of a study aiming to find out which media platforms are used by online audiences in Central Asia and Kazakhstan to access news, how active Kazakhstani users are on the Internet, and what news content most interests them. The study is based on the results of a large-scale survey conducted by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) in 2019 in four countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. A total of 4,130 people were interviewed, including a number of media experts. An online research method was used, in which respondents were selected among Internet users in real time (river sampling). The study showed that, along with increased penetration of the Internet into Central Asian countries, online consumers of news content in Kazakhstan use social networks and messengers more often than those in other Central Asian countries. It was found that social networks in Central Asian countries tend to replace traditional media for users' consumption of operational news. At the same time, Kazakhstanis do not pay attention to the source of information, which can contribute to the influence of fake news and manipulations. It was revealed that online news about economy, culture, ecology and a number of other spheres of human activity remain uninteresting for Kazakhstani users.*

***Key words:*** *social networks, news, online audience, Internet.*

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## Introduction

The Central Asia region, including Kazakhstan, is located at the junction of two continents, and is becoming more widely integrated into the global information space. Many factors contribute to this; the main one is the global development of information and communication technologies including increased internet penetration and the use of mobile technology, particularly in developing countries like those of Central Asia[1]. In this regard, it becomes urgent to identify the changing preferences of local consumers of news and information distributed via the Internet.

A study titled "Consumption of Internet News Materials in Central Asia" by the IWPR in 2019[2] was conducted as part of the project "Development of New Media and Digital Journalism in Central Asia". We took part in the study and this paper reports the data collected about Central Asia with a focus on Kazakhstan. Each country studied has its own characteristics based on the national specifics of online news consumption, and this study pays particular attention to online news consumption in Kazakhstan. It is worth noting that the IWPR study is the first attempt to measure the online audience of news media across the region and to offer comparisons with global trends. In Kazakhstan, the topic of digital media was first addressed in 2011 through the Internews Kazakhstan project, "New Digital Media of Central Asian Countries." However, there was no special study of the differences among regional audiences. Despite a noticeable shift towards Internet penetration, Kazakhstan is still on the periphery and like many other developing countries follows the lead of developed countries in the field of media.

## Literature review

The audience of new media has long been the subject of scrutiny by scientists and specialists, not only in journalism but by sociologists, philosophers, political scientists, economists, and others. The topic is extensive and requires diligent study due to the rapidly changing online environment as new social networks appear, and accordingly, new audiences develop to use them. Some types of new media are becoming less popular while others are growing. In addition, the flow of news itself is changing as the development of digital technologies leads to new formats. Both Kazakhstani and foreign scientists, including researchers from Central Asia, speak about the importance of studying such new

media as social networks and instant messengers. According to a number of researchers, "technological changes raise questions about the need to search for new tools for creating content in the digital environment" (Bykov, Gradyushko, Ibraeva, Turdubaeva, 2018: 11). These new tools include social networks and instant messengers which are modern platforms for disseminating news to new audiences. A number of Russian researchers pay great attention to the topic of new media audiences. In particular, Loseva (2016) points to the difficulty understanding these new audiences. The main problem is the rapid change in user habits, which is reflected in the properties of the audience. Information distribution channels are constantly changing and multiplying. "At the same time, each new media does not cancel the past means of communication and information, but occupies its own niche in a certain historical space-time and changes the nature and configuration of the information and communication environment" (Mikhailov, Mikhailov, 2004: 48).

New social networks have disrupted traditional means of creating and distributing news. An essential factor in determining the audience's news preferences online is the use of online news video. Dominant forces such as Facebook and Google have long promoted a format that allows users to create, distribute, and use forms of digital video for news while generating revenue from advertising (Kalogeropoulos, Nielsen, 2018). In this regard audiences become producers of news, but do not share the same professional background and ethics of traditional news producers. This creates opportunities for false or misleading news, some purposely misleading, and confusion among audiences. A number of scholars point out that disinformation carries profound consequences for the audience of social media. "Having received false information through the media or on the Web, users continue to believe in it even after it has been officially refuted, if the initial messages were consistent with their beliefs" (Mikheev, Nestik, 2018. p. 10). It follows that the audience does not always trust official sources which makes the process of gaining official trust much more difficult. It is worth noting that these audiences represent the emergence of virtual communities. Their distinctive features are: "the absence of geographical and political boundaries, a variety of grounds and motives for the unification and interaction of people" (Rykov, Nagorny, 2017: 374). In this case, "community producers" of news may be valued more than professional and official news sources.

How to evaluate new audiences is just now being explored. Majó-Vázquez, Nielsen and González-Bailón (2019) propose a new approach to comparing online news consumption using the example of three countries: USA, UK and Spain. The choice of these countries is because each of them has a different regulatory model and media system. A further complication is noted by Fletcher and Nielsen (2017) who conclude that media audiences in some countries are fragmented to a large extent due to the dominance of several media sources with very high penetration.

Another complication is the availability of online technology. Social networks have been the subject of study by researchers who found a connection between social networks and "smart" cities where technology is readily available (Sandoval-Almazán, Núñez Armas, 2016). Smart cities reflect the digital divide between places where the availability of online media is strong and those places where it is lacking. The promised benefits of digital technology are only realized in developing countries when the divide is addressed (Mariscal, 2005). The presence of a digital divide continues to be of interest to scholars. At the 22nd European Regional Conference of the International Telecommunications Society (ITS) a survey of literature about the digital divide was presented that revealed a continued lack of knowledge about how the digital divide is manifested in developing countries (Srinuan, Bohlin, 2011). This adds to questions and concerns about the way audiences in developing countries consume online news compared to their more developed counterparts. This points to the important differences in news consumption between audiences who have Internet access and those who do not.

In addition, online news consumption has led to an important question about whether consumers are ready to pay for online news. Danish researchers found that most people do not want to pay for news either online or offline (Kammer, Boeck, Hansen, Hauschildt, 2015). The willingness to pay for online news depends on several factors including the fundamental position of the consumer, journalistic quality, and the subscription model. Lack of funds to pay for news production can have implications for journalistic quality. At the same time, the results show that an older audience is more likely to pay for online news than a younger one. Another important factor is consumer confidence in modern Internet technologies. Issues such as security and privacy are often an obstacle for users to feel comfortable paying for and accessing information online (Shah, Lim, 2011). Currently,

there are attempts to predict the further development of new media segments. These forecasts are based on a key factor for new media – how to make money. New media allows users to create and distribute content with new models for how to monetization this content. In other words, studying an online audience is beneficial from a financial point of view by understanding the commercial potential of news consumption.

The relationship between the audience and news is undergoing a paradigm shift, and how the audience will ultimately access news is difficult to predict (Mustaffa, Sannusi, Abu Hasan, Mat Saad, 2017). The research into the consumption of news using new media reveals a complicated and uncertain media environment and points to the need for more research, particularly in developing countries. New media users in Central Asia and Kazakhstan provides an opportunity to further study the development of news using new media sources.

**Goals and objectives**

This research focuses on the news preferences of online audiences in Kazakhstan. It is important to determine the patterns of consumption of online news by understanding how Central Asians and Kazakhstanis access online news, how active they are, and what content is important. To accomplish this goal three research questions were asked.

RQ1: How do Central Asian users access online news? This question refers to the new media networks and technologies used by Central Asian audiences.

RQ2: Are Kazakhstanis active users of the Internet? This question addresses how much time Kazakhstanis use new media and whether usage differs by age, occupation, or gender.

RQ3: What content is important to Kazakhstani users of online news? This question identifies topics of interest for Kazakhstani audiences and the presentation characteristics they prefer.

**Methodology**

The research was conducted using an online survey. The online survey collected basic demographic details such as age, occupation, and gender. The respondents were divided into 6 age groups: 16–18, 19–23, 24–32, 33–42, 43–53, 53 and older. These age ranges were chosen to maximize the differentiation by age, to account for different age-related

activities by audiences, and to further differentiate individual preferences when choosing news and information. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate their occupation: schoolchildren, college student, specialist, mid-level manager, supervisor, entrepreneur, creative worker, farmer, freelancer, pensioner, and housewife in order to determine how much the occupation affects the level of consumption of online content.

For the online survey, 32 questions were prepared in Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Russian, Tajik and Uzbek languages with answer options. The questions were grouped into 6 sections: general information, topics and genres, platforms or channels, attitude, fact checking, gender sensitivity and hate speech in news materials. An example of a question from the General Information section includes: "For what reason do you read, watch or listen to news materials?" Answer options included: "Find out all the latest news and keep abreast of events"; "News reflect the real facts and incidents"; "News influences changes in the country"; "Necessity for work"; "Study requirements"; "I didn't think about it"; "Other (insert your answer)". The distribution of respondents by gender included 62% men and 38% women. It is noteworthy that the gender distribution of respondents in Kazakhstan differed from the other countries with 47% men and 57% women.

The study was limited by the low penetration of the Internet in rural areas and the low representation of women in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, evidence of the digital divide present in many developing countries. In total, the survey was conducted over 30 days (May–June 2019) with, 4,130 total respondents from Kyrgyzstan (1301), Kazakhstan (1004), Uzbekistan (971) and Tajikistan (854) aged 16 years and older.

The online audience of news content was defined to include the maximum audience, all visitors to the Internet who have used it at least once (Logunova, 2019: 241). The study used a relatively new method for attracting respondents from Central Asia and Kazakhstan – the River sampling technique. This technique allows researchers to attract respondents from active online users rather than prepared databases of users where only a certain percentage actually respond to the survey. River sampling has several important features: It allows researchers to sample actual and real users from different socio-demographic groups represented in almost equal parts. In addition, data on the desired topic can be collected on different platforms. River sampling also makes it easier to collect a large number of responses in a short period of time.

**Results**

**How do Central Asian users access online news?**

According to Internet World Stats (2019)[3], Kazakhstan is the leader in Internet penetration in Central Asia. In a country with a population of more than 18 million people, 78.9% use the Internet. In Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, these figures are much lower (see Figure 1 from Internet World Stats, 2019).

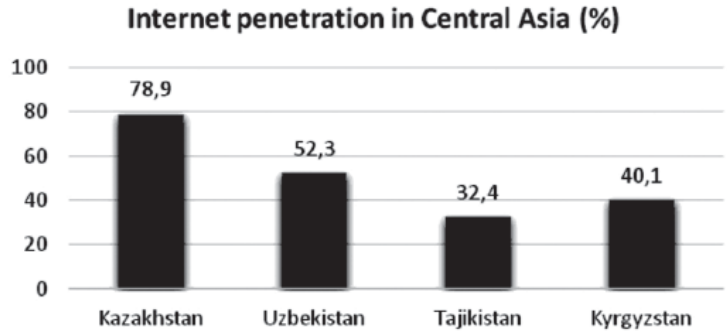



*Figure 1 from Internet World Stats, 2019*

The data also shows that Kazakhstanis use social networks and access those networks via mobile phones more than users in other Central Asian countries (see Figure 2 from Internet World Stats, 2019). Both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have very low penetration. This is mainly due to the lack of sufficient public and private investment in communications infrastructure and the unavailability of tariffs due to the high cost for ordinary citizens.

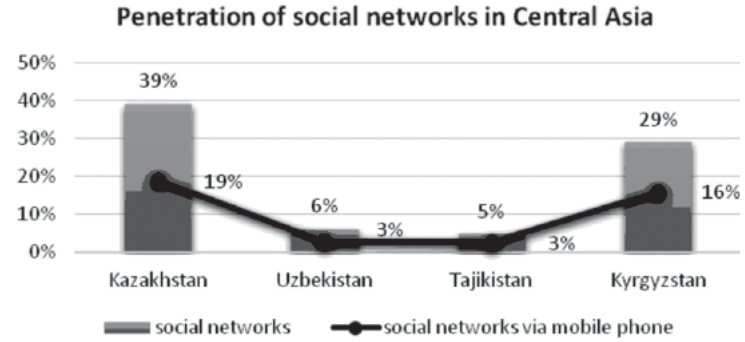



*Figure 2 from Internet World Stats, 2019*

Also, research shows that new media are popular news sources in Central Asia, with social networks, news sites, and messengers gaining popularity (see Figure 3 from IWPR CA, 2019). Unlike Internet penetration, this data shows evidence that all Central Asian countries use the new media to access news across multiple platforms. It suggests that access to new media results in strong use of news delivered through new media sources. While Kazakhstani consumers enjoy better access to new media, the percent of people who use social networks and news sites is similar across the Central Asian countries, although somewhat less than residents of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan At the same time, Uzbeks are leading by a substantial margin in the use of messengers as a source of news.

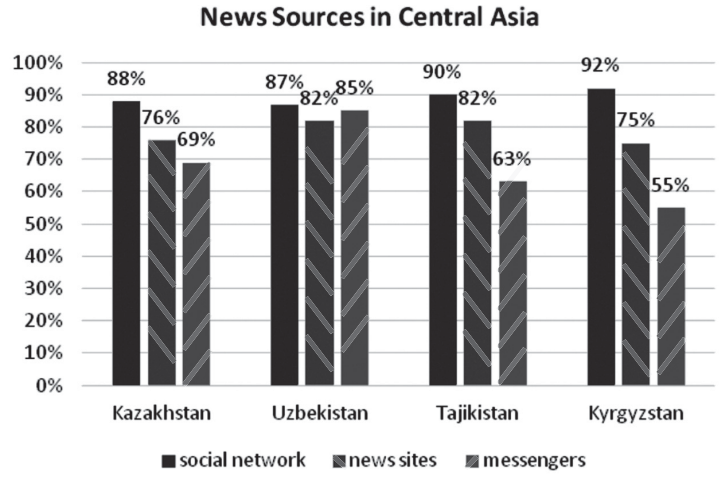



*Figure 3 from IWPR CA, 2019*

The use of new media varies by country. In Kazakhstan (89%) and Kyrgyzstan (83%) Instagram is the social network that dominates as a source of news. In Uzbekistan (70%) and Tajikistan (82%) Facebook is the dominant social media. Messengers show the most variability by country (see Figure 4 from IWPR CA, 2019). The WhatsApp messenger is more popular in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Telegram is the leader in Tajikistan, and users in Uzbekistan show a particularly strong preference for Telegram with little use of other messengers. Tajikistan has the lowest level of overall messenger use but the highest use of Viber. Viber has the lowest use among messenger services and may eventually lose its position

in Central Asia in the next few years. This data suggests that messengers are used within each country to access news but may not be used to exchange messages between countries who prefer different services.

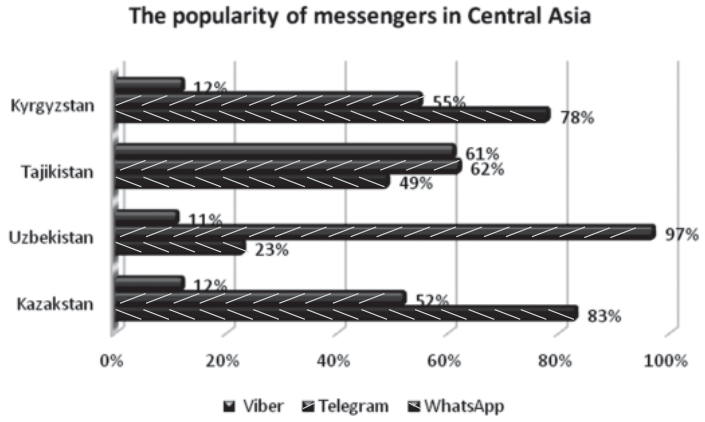



*Figure 4 from IWPR CA, 2019*

Overall, a high percentage of Central Asian respondents with access to new media use multiple platforms to access news. This is a positive trend reflecting the diversity of access and exposure to multiple news sources. At the same time, social networks dominate the means of access. Messengers are gaining popularity, but their use varies by country and has not yet stabilized across Central Asia. It remains to be seen whether one will emerge as dominant.

**Are Kazakhstanis active users of the Internet?**

Data was collected about how much time respondents spend online, and responses were classified into four categories: Heavy users (more than 5 hours per day), moderate users (2 to 5 hours), light users (less than 2 hours) and other (no online use indicated). The results showed that 78,3% of Kazakhstanis are moderate to heavy users and 52,7% use the Internet more than 5 hours per day. This indicates that Kazakhstanis are comfortable accessing the Internet and spend substantial time online. Only 19,5% were light users and 2,2% indicated they do not access the Internet.

The data for Kazakhstani users was further differentiated by age, occupation and gender. All age groups included substantial numbers of users, but in general time spent on the Internet increased with age and peaked with the 24 to 32 age group (see Table 1a). The 24 to 32 age group spent the most time online with 84.6% of them either moderate or heavy users. This age group included the most heavy users at 31,1%. The 19 to 23 age group reported 81% of users as either moderate or heavy which was the only other group to have 80% of members listed as moderate to heavy users. This group also had the largest percentage of moderate users at 56,6%. Usage drops after age 42. Users who are 53 years old and older spend the least amount of time online with 64,6% listed as moderate to heavy users. This still represents substantial use of the Internet. Also, this group had the largest percentage of light users (32,9%). One might expect the 16-18 age group to be the heaviest users. Younger people are more comfortable with new media and are generally more active users, but school activities may impose limits on time spent online. However, 76% were moderate to heavy users. There is a relationship between age and usage. Moderate to heavy use is evident by the age of 16 to 18 years old and increases through age 24 to 32 when it declines. The data suggests higher Internet usage occurs during peak earning years which may indicate the need for Internet connectivity within various professions.

*Table 1a*

**Daily amount of time spent on the Internet by age, %**

| Age | Other | Light | Moderate | Heavy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 16–18 | 2,9 | 21,2 | 52,9 | 23,1 |
| 19–23 | 3,2 | 15,8 | 56,6 | 24,4 |
| 24–32 | 1,0 | 14,3 | 53,5 | 31,1 |
| 33–42 | 2,7 | 20,1 | 54,3 | 22,8 |
| 43–53 | 1,7 | 27,3 | 47,1 | 24,0 |
| 53 < | 2,4 | 32,9 | 43,9 | 20,7 |
| Average | 2,2 | 21,6 | 51,6 | 24,5 |

Other = no indicated use; light = less than 2 hours; moderate = 2-5 hours; heavy = more than 5 hours

The occupation of users revealed a number of interesting findings (see Table 1b). Overall, 79,9% of occupations are moderate to heavy online users. All freelance workers (100%) use the Internet at least two

hours per day. This group uses the Internet exclusively and did not report any other use. They also have a high number of heavy users (31,8%). There are three occupation where over 80% of members identified themselves as either moderate or heavy users, including pensioners (85%), creative workers (84,6%), and business operators (83,3%). Five occupations (college students, specialists, mid-level managers, housewives, and "others") report that 76% to 78% of members are moderate to heavy users. Two groups, middle school students and supervisors, are the only ones to identify less than 70% of members as moderate to heavy users (68,8% and 69,8% respectively). These figures show that online activities are used through a variety of occupations and that Internet use is becoming vital as part of their work.

*Table 1b*

**Daily amount of time spent on the internet by occupation, %**

| Occupation | Other | Light | Moderate | Heavy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Other | 2,8 | 18,3 | 49,5 | 29,4 |
| Schoolchildren | 6,3 | 25,0 | 50,0 | 18,8 |
| College student | 3,5 | 19,1 | 54,3 | 23,0 |
| Specialist | 1,1 | 21,1 | 54,7 | 23,2 |
| Mid manager | | 22,2 | 50,8 | 27,0 |
| Supervisor | | 30,2 | 37,7 | 32,1 |
| Entrepreneur | 3,3 | 13,3 | 53,3 | 30,0 |
| Creative worker | 7,7 | 7,7 | 56,4 | 28,2 |
| Freelancer | | | 68,2 | 31,8 |
| Pensioner | | 15,0 | 60,0 | 25,0 |
| Housewife | 1,9 | 20,2 | 50,0 | 27,9 |
| Average | 2,4 | 21,6 | 51,6 | 24,5 |

Other = no indicated use; light = less than 2 hours; moderate = 2-5 hours; heavy = more than 5 hours

Supervisors have the highest percentage of heavy users (32,1%), but are the only group somewhat equally divided across time-use categories. For most occupations, the largest percent of respondents are moderate users with a range of Internet use from 50% to 56%. One group stands out in this category. Over 68% of freelancers are moderate users, which is substantially higher than other occupations. Slightly more than half of users in each occupation are moderate. An average of 21,6% of users

across all occupations are identified as light users. Generally, this category held the lowest percentage of users (excluding the 'other' category of non-users). For all occupations at least 92% of users access the Internet daily, and for nine of the eleven occupations 96% or more of the respondents access the Internet daily. Again, this indicates the importance of the Internet as part of modern professional life and the importance of Internet availability.

Male and female responses also indicate moderate to heavy Internet use (see Table 1c). Moderate to heavy use is reported by 80,6% of male and 76,5% of female users. The percentage of heavy use is similar with 25,1% of men and 25,9% of women identified as heavy users. More males are moderate users (55,5%) than females (50,6%), and more females are light users (21,3%) than males (17,2%), But figures are generally similar for each gender indicating that for Kazakhstanis there is not a digital divide based on gender.

*Table 1c*

**Daily amount of time spent on the internet by gender, %**

| Gender | Other | Light | Moderate | Heavy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 2,3 | 17,2 | 55,5 | 25,1 |
| Female | 2,1 | 21,3 | 50,6 | 25,9 |
| Average | 2,2 | 19,25 | 53,0 | 25,5 |

Other = no indicated use; light = less than 2 hours; moderate = 2-5 hours; heavy = more than 5 hours

Most people in the survey are identified as moderate to heavy users regardless of differences by age, occupation and gender. Use increases by age until about 30 followed by a drop in use. Most occupations rely on the internet with a high percentage using the internet daily. In combination, the data shows that Internet use is important in Kazakhstanis' daily lives.

**What content is important to Kazakhstani users of online news?**

Several news topics are identified as important to Kazakhstanis. Social news is the most popular content with 76,1% of respondents seeking such content. People aged 33–42 (82,9%) are most interested in social news. This is the only category that is important for over 70% of respondents, and 10% higher than the next highest category. Three

categories, education news (66%), domestic and foreign policy (65,3%), and science and technology (64%), have similar levels of interest. It is not surprising that education news is most popular with school age respondents (75% of 16–18 years old) and least interesting to people past school age. The percentage of respondents interested in policy suggests that Kazakhstanis want to stay informed about current events. Unlike interest in education, policy news is most interesting for an older audience (53 and older at 84,6%), while under 50% of school age and college students show interest in policy. Science technology is a primary interest of schoolchildren (86,7%). The global popularization of science and new advances in digital technology (gadgets, smartphones, computer games), as well as the realization that science and technology are important for their future, encourage students to follow news of science and technology. Only 1,6% of respondents indicate no interest in science and technology. The data suggests that most of the population has at least some interest in science and technology.

A number of topics are cited as interesting by more than 50% of respondents. Health news is of interest to 59,2% of the respondents. Both the age and gender of respondents align with interest in health news. People over 53 years old are most interested, probably due to increasing need for health care, and the age group from 19 to 23 years is the least interested. The topic of health care is more interesting for women (62,9%) than for men (54,6%), and Kazakhstani housewives (80%) show the greatest interest in health news. Women also show the greatest interest in news about culture and the arts at 61,3% compared to 47,7% for men. Overall, 55,2% of respondents have an interest in culture and arts, including older audiences (67,6%). Environment and ecology news is favored by 54,8% of respondents. One reason for low interest, in our opinion, is the small amount of information presented about environmental news and the lack of environmental journalists. E. A. Shcherbinina (Shcherbinina, 2015: 29) noted, “Today, the ecological culture of society as a whole depends on the environmental literacy of the journalists themselves, on the quality of the presentation of environmental information in the media”. Without good environmental journalists this topic does not get the attention it should. Finally, news about women, children and the elderly is sought by 51% of respondents. Younger people are least interested in this news while housewives (60,4%) show the greatest interest.

There were three topics that did not attract the attention of at least 50% of the respondents, including sports, listed by 47,2% of respon-

dents. This is somewhat surprising given the popularity of sports. Young people, including students from 16–32, are the most interested in sports. It is not surprising that men (62,4%) are more interested than women (34,9%). Interest in the economy and finance is 46,8%, and almost half of the respondents (49,6%) rarely or very rarely show interest in this topic. The topic of economics and finance is difficult and complicated for users to understand, except for those who encounter it as part of their work. Finally, the lowest topic of interest to Kazakhstanis is news about disabilities. Only 33,4% show concern. Among those least interested in news about disabilities are managers. This could have implications for those with disabilities who are employed.

In addition to questions about preferred topics, respondents were asked about preferences in news presentation. There is a strong preference for short news notes (84,5%), particularly among respondents 53 years and older (96,3%), business owners (96,7%), and pensioners (95%). This is a concern when complicated topics need longer in-depth coverage, which could lead to oversimplified coverage. This is further supported by the data that shows that many Kazakhstani respondents (48,1%) are not interested in journalistic investigations. Most interested are pensioners at 73,7%, and least interested are students (36,4%). Only half the respondents consume analytical material online, mostly by Kazakhstanis age 43 and over (60%). This likely indicates increased interest in investigations as people age and become more involved in public life.

There is also interest in multi-media formats (53,5%). Illustrations, infographics, music and/or video are preferred by younger audiences while older audiences are the least interested in material that supplements text. Women are less interested than men in multi-media content. Video reporting is preferred to audio or podcasting (67,8% to 28% respectively). Age is a primary factor, with young people preferring news delivered by video, while the elderly are more likely to listen to radio. This is consistent with changes occurring elsewhere in the media as young people encounter more multimedia content early in their media exposure. Rarely do people consume tests or quizzes online and respondents rarely watch live broadcasts. When asked about virtual reality content only 25,1% are interested. This may be a reasonably high percentage given the infancy of virtual reality technology.

Kazakhstanis consume a variety of news content with preferences that reflect age, gender, and occupation. Regardless of demographic differences, a high percentage of people have interest in multiple news

topics. When Kazakhstani respondents were asked to choose between foreign sources and national, almost half (46,4%) replied that it did not matter. The materials of national and foreign/international publications are preferred equally by respondents (27% each). Kazakhstanis feel the need for additional information and do not wish to remain in an information vacuum. More than half of the respondents (54%) consume news content "in order to know all the latest news and to keep abreast of events." Moreover, many residents of the country are "omnivorous" in terms of information. Kazakhstanis consume news on a variety of topics. This explains their ability to talk about events that are not directly related to them and occurring both within the country and beyond its borders. Also, this makes it more difficult for official or governmental news sources to present a singular view of events. However, only 16% believe that the news reflects real facts and incidents, and a large percentage do not pay attention to the source of news materials due to various factors; they are not source conscious. The lack of selectivity and ability to verify news sources indicates a low degree of media literacy among the population. For this reason, users are more influenced by fake news and manipulation. Media experts note that the average user has little awareness of the source credibility of the information they consume, and concern about sources is practically absent. Although Kazakhstanis consume various news sources online, going from one source to another through links may mean that people do not remember the source or remember where they read, saw or heard a news story for the first time. On one hand, this is good because users consume a variety of sources. On the other hand, it is bad for the media because Kazakhstanis' recognition of the source is lost and source credibility diminished.

**Conclusions**

This research pursued several goals. First, we investigated how and through which media platforms the countries of Central Asia, and Kazakhstan in particular, access online news. This is important for understanding how new media in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is used. We also tried to understand, a) whether Kazakhstanis are active on the Internet, b) what content is important for Kazakhstani users of online news.

This study found that people in Central Asia and Kazakhstan use the Internet frequently, if they have access. At the same time, respondents

access online news through a variety of platforms. News organizations may wish to tailor news to the different platforms as news seekers access content through multiple platforms. It was found that no one platform is extensively dominant which is a positive reflection of the diversity of news sources used in Central Asia. The result also showed that the use of messengers is extensive and increasing but reflects a less stable and less cohesive use from one Central Asian country to the other. While there is still a digital divide between urban and rural access to the Internet, those with access are frequent Internet users. The moderate to heavy use by those with access suggests that increasing Internet infrastructures to reach outside of urban areas would be welcome and useful.

The present results show that in Kazakhstan most respondents are considered moderate to heavy users of the internet and spend substantial time online. Every age group and occupation used the internet. Three-quarters of all age groups and occupations use the Internet at least 2 hours per day which means it is becoming a vital part of their personal and professional lives. Where access to the Internet is available it is widely and extensively used. It should be noted that, in general, Kazakhstanis feel the need to be informed and seek information. It was revealed that many residents of the country are "omnivorous" in terms of information and are active consumers of news through new media resources. However, the lack of attention to news sources is problematic. One of the primary concerns raised by the study is that respondents do not believe news reflects real facts, while at the same time respondents show little concern for the sources of news. This opens the door for misleading and false news with little opportunity for self-correction. This problem is best addressed through greater attention to media literacy. For those concerned with media literacy, the identification of preferences by occupation, age, and gender provides information about how to best approach these groups with advice and training about information consumption.

In general, the preference for short-form rather than long-form news is a concern as well. Reporting about complicated and/or in-depth issues requires time to produce and disseminate and may not be suited for some online platforms, particularly messenger services that generally use shorter formats. This is also problematic when audience members become producers and do not understand how to report complex topics. The study found that a lack of qualified experienced environmental journalists has led to less reporting about environmental issues, which is expressed in lower interest by online news consumers. With rising global

concerns about climate change and environmental protection this is a weakness in news coverage. Another unexpected result of the study was that women in Kazakhstan are almost equally interested in obtaining information about politics as men. This was in contrast to other Central Asian countries with larger differences between men and women. P. M. Fedorov (Fedorov, 2019: 109), who studied gender in Internet activity notes, "interest in politics, characteristic of the male gender role, is also manifested in communication on the Internet: men usually comment on messages more often. However, the drama and emotional richness of the commented events attract an additional audience, and women are the majority in it". It is a positive development in Kazakhstan women are active online consumers of news, particularly regarding politics. It would be beneficial for news organizations to produce news to attract women in order to equalize news consumption in the other Central Asian countries.

The high preference for social news may reflect two important aspects of online access to news. First, most respondents access online news through social media sites which blend social network content with news content. While this blend is popular, it may erase the boundary between hard news and softer social news, further eroding news credibility. Second, professionals use social media sites to connect and share information which further directs them to information and connections related to their work. This expands their professional network to include virtual communities which would be unavailable to those without Internet access.

The high use of social media sites for news is likely to continue, and because these platforms offer both social networking and news consumption the need to understand source credibility increases. The results of the study showed that Kazakhstanis engage a variety of news platforms and express strong interest in multiple topics even though these vary by age, gender, and occupation.

This study adds to our understand of news content choices and preferences among online audiences in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. The main takeaway is that social networks are rapidly becoming leaders as sources of news in Central Asia, and instant messengers are gaining in popularity. If this trend persists, social networks and instant messengers will eventually become the main source of news for online audiences of this region, which is an expected result of the study. At the same time, the struggle within and between social networks and instant messengers for the hearts and minds of consumers will also intensify, particularly as

the digital divide diminishes, which will encourage social network developers and instant messengers to introduce more new technologies. However, this increased use also brings new concerns about how to best reach audiences and best prepare them to critically understand the news they consume.

## Notes

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