

## New Media, Blogs, and Journalism in Kazakhstan

### Kazakistan'da Yeni Medya, Bloglar ve Gazetecilik

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#### ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the place of new media technologies and blogging activities in journalism practice in Kazakhstan. New media tools have had a place in our lives for more than twenty years, contrary to what the adjective new implies. In this relatively long period, new media tools continued to develop by going through various stages. In this context, classical websites have developed to allow blogging activities all over the world since the late 90s. This study aims to provide a general framework for the emergence and development of blogging activities in Kazakhstan. Then, the close relationship between the blogosphere and Kazakh journalists' professional life will be evaluated. A general evaluation of Kazakh blogosphere reveals that blogs are social spaces that allow user participation in many areas, from hobbies to professional life in Kazakhstan. Kazakh journalists also integrate blogs and microblogs into their professional lives in parallel to global trends. They regularly read blogs, and almost half of them take part in sociopolitical discussions on several blogs. Blogs created new channels of communication, new journalism styles, and new areas of expression for Kazakh journalists. On the other hand, regulations on mass media and the internet in Kazakhstan raise some concerns about the freedom of expression. However, there are also promising developments to broaden the freedom of expression for Kazakh bloggers.

**Keywords:** New media, blog, microblog, Kazakhstan, journalism

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## ÖZ

Bu çalışma yeni medya teknolojilerinin ve blog faaliyetlerinin Kazakistan'daki gazetecilik pratiğinde sahip olduğu yeri incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Yeni medya ifadesindeki yeni kelimesinin yaptığı çağrışımın aksine, yeni medya araçları insan yaşamına gireli yirmi yıldan uzun bir süre olmuştur. Bu görece uzun zaman dilimi içerisinde yeni medya araçları çeşitli merhalelerden geçerek gelişmeye devam etmiştir. Bu bağlamda 1990'ların sonlarından itibaren tüm dünyada blog faaliyetlerine olanak tanıyan web siteleri ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu çalışma öncelikle Kazakistan'da blog faaliyetlerinin ortaya çıkışı ve gelişimine dair genel bir çerçeve çizmektedir. Daha sonra Kazak blog evreni ile Kazak gazetecilerin mesleki yaşamı arasındaki yakın ilişki incelenecektir. Kazak bloglarıyla ilgili yapılan genel değerlendirme blogların Kazakistan'da hobi-lerden profesyonel yaşama kadar pek çok alanda kullanıcı katılımına olanak tanıyan sosyal alanlar olduğunu göstermektedir. Kazak gazeteciler blog ve mikroblog platformlarını küresel eğilimlere de uygun olarak mesleki yaşamlarına entegre etmektedir. Kazak gazeteciler düzenli olarak blog yazıları okumakta ve neredeyse yarısı çeşitli bloglarda sosyopolitik tartışmalarda yer almaktadır. Bloglar Kazak gazetecileri için yeni iletişim kanallarını, yeni gazetecilik tarzlarını ve yeni bir ifade alanını beraberinde getirmiştir. Diğer yandan Kazakistan'da kitle iletişim araçları ve internet hakkındaki mevzuat ifade özgürlüğüyle ilgili kaygılar uyandırmaktadır. Bununla birlikte Kazak blog yazarlarının ifade özgürlüğü alanını genişletmek üzere ümit vaat eden gelişmeler de yaşanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yeni medya, blog, mikroblog, Kazakistan, gazetecilik

## Introduction

Although the new media is considered a new phenomenon, as the name implies, traditional media, including print media, radio, and television, were also new media tools in the early periods of their use. However, today, when we say new media, we generally mean new communication tools that offer changing possibilities in terms of production, distribution, and use owing to digitalization. In other words, today, the new media category includes several tools such as the internet, smartphone, tablet, etc. The traditional media category involves the tools such as television, radio, and newspaper, which are no longer new.

Discussions about which tools the new media cover has gained momentum since the early 2000s. Does the term new media cover only websites, multimedia computers, computer games, CD-ROMs/DVDs, and virtual reality items, or it also includes other forms of public communication, such as digitally edited television programs, digital designs, photography, and advertising activities that are generated and printed through computers? These and similar questions were asked frequently, and



attempts were made to draw a boundary between new and traditional media. Concepts such as interactivity, multimedia, and hypertext have been at the centre of the literature since the days when social media environments were not a part of online communication yet.

Orihuela (2003) states that the writers and journalists are not the only ones who produce information and content in new media. Any network user can also become a 'writer', and this situation reveals a new paradigm of "e-communication". Gitelman (2006) defines new media as communication structures that have both technological forms and unique protocols associated with them and a social reality in which communication becomes a cultural practice. This perspective is linked to the technological revolution that came with Web 2.0 and allowed the creation of communication tools, which Castells called "self-communication" tools (Castells, 2009). Social networking sites can be defined as a kind of self-communication tool. According to Castells (2009, p. 88), these are mass media because a YouTube video or a blog with RSS links is potentially available worldwide. At the same time, they are self-communication because the user creates the message, identifies possible recipients, and can select specific messages or content on the Internet.

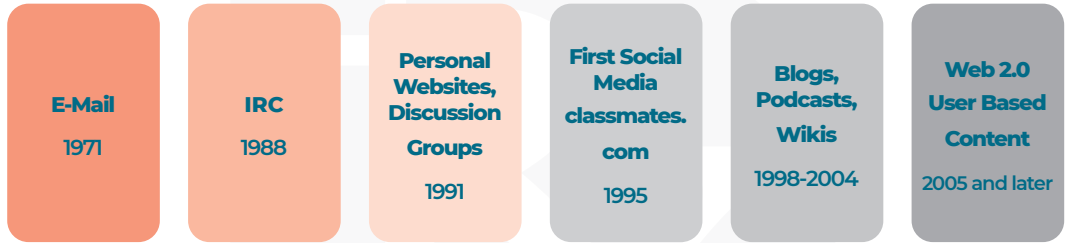
New media differs from traditional media in two aspects. First, new media tools are more personalized and more interactive. For example, a website is accessible to a large number of users and uses the preferences of each user as input. Another important feature of new media is that various media tools such as audio, video, and text come together as multimedia. Today, it is even possible to come across a video on one of the pages of a book read using an e-book reader. From this point of view, it would be misleading to consider the new media phenomenon only as reflections of traditional media in the digital world. New media should be considered as a vast communication universe that includes not only internet newspapers but also websites, smartphone and tablet applications, digital games, web televisions, e-books, blogs, digital radios, wiki pages, and all similar digital communication technologies.

The increasing miniaturization of technologies identified with the new media and the fact that internet access is now beyond computers and smartphones left almost no area in society that new media tools cannot reach. All users can be reached anywhere, at any time, and the information transmitted is becoming more and more personalized. In other words, new media tools have a unique language, communication characteristics, and content format and differ from traditional media in these respects. However, new media and traditional media continue to co-exist, and traditional media is more and more affected by new media every day. The traditional newspapers and televisions, which stepped into the new media world with their digital versions shortly after the Internet entered our lives, now have a very fundamental connection with new media technologies to continue their activities. Today, it seems

almost impossible to find a newspaper without an internet version and does not offer the opportunity to share its news on Twitter, Facebook, or other internet channels. From this point of view, we can say that the new media in 2021 is not as new as it used to be.

Social media tools, which emerged shortly after the new media entered the communication arena, are a field of information shared over social networks on the internet. Although Facebook and Twitter are the first to come to mind when we think of social networks, the origins of social media can be traced back to the first e-mail technology experiments in the 1970s. The fact that personal websites, online discussion groups, and chat environments began to spread with small steps in the 90s heralded the scope of social media further developing in the 2000s.

Figure 1: Evolution of Social Media



Source: (Sajithra & Patil, 2013)

The purpose of this study is to draw a general framework for the new media and blogging activities in Kazakhstan. To this end, this study first evaluates the statistical data published on the use of the internet and social media in Kazakhstan. A literature review on the emergence and development of the blogosphere in Kazakhstan was carried out. In the last part of the study, the contributions of new media and blogging activities to the professional life of journalists were evaluated.

## Blogs and the Blogosphere

Blogs are websites where the blogger(s) systematically publish articles on specific topics and display them in an order from the most recent to the oldest. Blogs' content often include various multimedia elements such as text, photos, videos, sound recordings, animations, and graphics. The blogger shares his/her ideas and experiences on various topics or a specific topic, which is the main theme of the blog.

Modern blogs emerged as the digitalization of the practice of keeping a diary. Justin Hall, who started a personal blog in 1994, is often referred to as one of the first bloggers (Harmanci, 2005). This and similar early blogs were simply minor updates to existing websites compared to today's blogs. By the end of the 90s, tools and technologies for maintaining a web blog had evolved, attracting more attention to blogs worldwide. These developments resulted in the blog genre being separated from other websites and viewed as a distinct digital practice over time.

Although the introduction of blogs to the internet world took a little time, their development in the following years was faster. By 1998-1999, the use of blogs became widespread, and many blogs were established simultaneously. The first blogs can be listed as follows (Sajithra & Patil, 2013):

- ▶ Open Diary, founded by Bruce Ableson in October 1998. Open Diary was the first blog to allow readers to comment on blog posts.
- ▶ LiveJournal, founded by Brad Fitzpatrick in March 1999.
- ▶ Pitas.com, founded by Andrew Smales in July 1999. It offered an easier alternative to creating a kind of "news page" on their website.
- ▶ Diaryland, a more personal diary community, was established in September 1999.
- ▶ blogger.com, founded by Evan Williams and Meg Hourihan (Pyra Labs) in August 1999 (invested in by Google in February 2003).

Despite these developments, there were less than 50 blogs worldwide in 1998. For this reason, blogging is considered a twenty-first-century activity. By 2006, the Technorati blog search engine indexed 57.4 million blogs worldwide (Ho, 2007). Blogs typically have the following descriptive features in common (Conniff, 2009):

1. Displaying blog entries in reverse chronological order
2. Unfiltered content
3. Opportunity to comment
4. Hypertext links to other sites
5. Tendency to cite other text resources
6. Informal, ironic style

Technological developments made it possible to carry out blogging activities with technologies other than computers. Today, tablets and smartphones also have convenient technology for creating and publishing blog content. This allowed blog activities

to reflect every aspect of daily life. Today, blogging has become both a profession in itself and a part of the activities of various professional groups. According to a study conducted by FirstSiteGuide (2021) with 1030 blogger contributors in 2020, 49.32% of bloggers maintain blogs as a full-time job, 31.84% a part-time job, 14.76% a hobby, and 4.08% a part of their corporate job.

Since the 2000s, the global spread of blogging activities, as well as the increasing miniaturization of technologies that enable blogging, has brought about a transformation in blogging activities. The concept of microblogging, which is the combination of blogging with social media tools, is a blog environment where content is much shorter than standard blog content, as the prefix micro- implies. Microblogging posts are usually a few sentences at most and often contain an image, video, or link to another web resource. Although Twitter is the most well-known microblogging site, posts on Facebook can also be considered microblogging activities.

### Internet, Social Media, and Blogs in Kazakhstan

According to Internetstats statistics, internet usage around the world increased by 1331.9% between the years 2000-2021. In Kazakhstan, one of the most important countries in Central Asia, the internet is accessible to a larger percentage of the population (Internet World Stats, 2021).

Table 1: Expansion of Internet Use in Kazakhstan

Population (2021)	18,994,962
Internet Users in 2000	70,000
Internet Users in 2021	14,669,853
Population with Internet Access	%77.2

Mysayeva (2016) divides internet development in Kazakhstan into three stages. The first stage was strictly informative, with the website laying out specific information. The internet was a means of communication and dialogue in the second stage. Finally, the current period in which the Internet network is transforming into a mass communication system, including social networks, blogging systems, and other new platforms, is the third. With the emergence of social media, the Internet world entered a new era. The production and dissemination of content and increased interactivity made the possibilities of the Internet more widespread than ever before. Social media space in Kazakhstan is no exception. Since the day it entered the lives of citizens of Kazakhstan, social media users have become a part of many local and global networks. All these platforms allow Kazakhstan citizens to write their own blogs, communicate with their acquaintances and relatives, read news from

Kazakhstan and the world and share multimedia content they produce themselves, such as videos and music, with others.

Year	Percentage of Social Media Users
2015	56 %
2016	66.6%
2017	65.7%
2018	69.7%

Source: (Oshanova, 2021)

The increasingly widespread use of social media in Kazakhstan is also a remarkable phenomenon. Table 2 shows the increase in social media users in Kazakhstan over the years. In addition, according to statistics, the number of internet users in Kazakhstan increased by 5% from 2020 to 2021, while the number of social media users increased by 26%. According to 2021 data, the number of Facebook users in Kazakhstan exceeded 11 million (Internet World Stats, 2021), and the rate of those using at least one social media tool is now above 63% (DataReportal, 2021). The coronavirus epidemic that has affected the world since December 2019 and the increase in the time spent at home is likely to have an impact on the increase in the use of social media in Kazakhstan. Statcounter data reports the distribution of Kazakhstan social media users by social media tools as follows (StatCounter, 2021):

Social Media	Users Rate
YouTube	%23.38
Instagram	%16.54
Facebook	%16.29
Vkontakte	%14.76
Pinterest	%13.02
Twitter	%11.56

Blogs are another important type of social media content. Although blogging activities were carried out on websites such as blogger.com, wordpress.com, tumblr.com, especially in the early 2000s, the emergence of social media channels such as

YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and even Twitter caused blogging activities to shift to these channels to a significant extent. Today, the first thing that comes to mind when we say blogging is the content providers of channels such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook. In other words, the emergence of these social media tools as microblogs added another dimension to the blogosphere.

### **The Place of Blogs in Journalism Practice in Kazakhstan**

The word blog is derived from the English word “weblog”, meaning ‘online diary’ and is used in many languages. In other words, if a person owns a blog, it means that he/she publishes daily posts on his/her blog, and readers can read them and make their own contributions. Over time, these blog activities led to the introduction of the concept of citizen journalism into the literature, and popular bloggers began to be accepted as “representatives of citizen journalism”.

It would be more accurate to consider the Kazakhstan blogosphere not only within the borders of Kazakhstan but also including Türkiye, Mongolia, China, and Europe. Accordingly, drawing the boundaries of the Kazakhstan blogosphere is a difficult task. There are blogs written in the Kazakh language in various countries on a wide variety of topics such as the Kazakh language, religion, and politics.

One of the first blogs written in Kazakh was the blog “Elvira’s Kitchen”, founded in 2005. The content of the blog focuses exclusively on Kazakh cuisine. Another blog published in Kazakh was Urimtal, which was founded by journalist Askhat Erkimbay in 2006 and produced content on social, political, and religious issues. Again, among the first bloggers are Arshat Orazov, the founder of the Kazakh national portal “Masagan”, and Bakhytgul Salykova, who writes mostly about cultural and artistic events in Kazakhstan. As can be seen from the contents, blogging activities have given great importance to the elements that make up the national identity of Kazakhstan since the beginning of the 2000s. Even blogging courses were established with the initiatives of journalist Askhat Erkimbay and some other bloggers, and communication faculty students, as well as experts from all fields, attended these courses (Nurpeis, 2016). In this sense, professional journalists have an undeniable contribution to the spread of blogs in Kazakhstan.

Social media and journalism have a complex web of relationships. Technically, anyone with internet access can become active in blogging and produce their own content, similar to journalism. In this respect, social media differs from traditional media with its huge potential for participation. Handicaps such as the high walls in front of access in traditional mass media, the low number of information providers, and the relative scarcity of participation opportunities appear to have been overcome to some extent by social media.





Kazakh journalist, editor, and publisher Aigerim Agyltayeva stated in an interview that people know more about the world and people's problems thanks to bloggers (Agyltayeva, 2012). In other words, bloggers provide comments on Kazakhstan's problems that contain more than the information provided by the official and traditional media.

The blogosphere in Kazakhstan is a manifestation of citizen journalism, which became popular with the development of the internet and new digital technologies (Orazov, 2020). With a video camera or just a mobile phone, many issues that do not attract the attention of traditional media can be brought to the agenda. Even the personal posts of some bloggers can attract attention comparable to that of traditional media.

Although some Kazakh researchers claim that new media in Kazakhstan is not at a level to compete with traditional media (Sukhaceva, 2011, as cited in Bulatova & Beisenkulov, 2017), it can be predicted that this situation will tend to change in the future, considering the development speed of new media globally. The increase in internet users in Kazakhstan over the years alone is a factor that strengthens this prediction. Karim Massimov, who served as the prime minister for two terms in Kazakhstan, stated that the traditional media of Kazakhstan had to compete more and more with the internet; therefore, they had to adapt themselves to this new situation (Emrich, Plakhina, & Tsyrenzhapova, 2013). By 2021, we can say that this adaptation largely took place in Kazakhstan. Even state-owned media outlets are adapting to new technologies and blogging activities. For example, although Khabar Television is state-owned, it allows both journalists and readers to create a personal blog on this website.

The rapid development of blog activities in Kazakhstan also had a significant impact on the professional lives of journalists. Journalists who tend to write long, enjoy communicating with their readers indirectly through means other than traditional media, and prefer to present multimedia content, are actively involved in blogging activities. For Kazakh journalists, blogs allow journalists to go beyond the traditional role of impartiality attributed to them. Personal blogs provide an alternative environment, especially for journalists working in state-controlled media outlets in Kazakhstan (Bulatova & Beisenkulov, 2017). According to a study by Bulatova and Beisenkulov (2017), the most widely used blog/microblogging tool by Kazakh journalists is Facebook (62%). 72% of Kazakh journalists read blogs, and 21% regularly post on blogs every day. In addition, 40% of Kazakh journalists state that they participate in sociopolitical discussions on blogs. Another notable finding of their study was that 77% of Kazakh journalists refer to blogs while collecting relevant information that they would give their readers. Blogs are also suitable environments for expressing political opposition, and blog activities have the potential to affect political life in

Kazakhstan. Personal blogs offer an alternative expression space, especially for journalists working in state broadcasting organizations. These findings show that both the production of blog content in the classical sense and microblogging activities are an important part of the profession of Kazakh journalists.

When all these findings are evaluated together, it is evident that Kazakh journalists are not behind their colleagues around the world in terms of blogging activities. Blogs are important tools for journalists to fulfil both their professional and social responsibilities. One of the effective examples of the use of blogs in terms of the social responsibility activities of journalists was experienced in May 2010. Journalist, blogger, and media expert Yerzhan Suleimanov organized protests in his blog pages on Yvision.kz and Facebook against bringing dolphins to the dolphin park at Almaty Circus in a water tank on a bus hundreds of kilometres from Russia to Kazakhstan. Although the participation in the protests was insufficient, the images and videos taken during the event spread through all social media channels and national media organs.

However, some legal regulations in Kazakhstan worry journalists and other people who carry out blogging activities. Internet freedom faces state intervention. With the law amendment made in 2009, the term “mass media” in legislation was expanded to include all internet resources, including personal blogs. Legal regulations hold the author or editor of an internet content administratively and legally responsible even for comments made by third parties on the site (Emrich, Plakhina, & Tsyrenzhapova, 2013). The Ministry of Information and Communications of Kazakhstan created a system in 2017 where users can check whether there is a judicial or government decision banning website they want to visit. Although the transparency reports published by Facebook and Twitter in late 2019 stated that Kazakhstan had no content removal requests (Facebook, n.d.; Twitter, n.d.), there are approximately 30,500 banned websites in Kazakhstan as of May 2020 (Freedom House, 2021).

The Constitution of Kazakhstan recognizes freedom of expression in the mass media. Although internet resources are accepted as mass media, bloggers cannot enjoy the same rights as journalists (Freedom House, 2021). However, a draft (National Information Space Development Plan 2020-2022) adopted in Kazakhstan in April 2020 aims to broaden the freedom of expression for bloggers and plans to accredit bloggers by various government organizations, just like traditional journalists. This is a promising development for the freedom of expression in Kazakh new media, especially for the journalists who were able to go beyond the role that is attributed to the journalism by the traditional media.



## Discussion and Conclusion

The media field, which developed rapidly after independence in Kazakhstan, became even richer with the development of new media in the country since the 2000s. More and more people gain internet access every year, and social media usage statistics prove this increase. Social media enriched the participation of Kazakh citizens in social and political discussions and made them a part of many global networks. Blogs and microblogs have been published in the Kazakh language since 2005, and since then, they have occupied an important place in the activities of Kazakhstan citizens in the digital environment. It is also notable that the blogosphere in the Kazakh language consists not only of bloggers living in Kazakhstan but also Kazakh people around the world.

The blogosphere in the country took its first steps with the contribution of both amateur users and professional journalists and has not stopped growing until today in parallel with global trends. Kazakh journalists played an important role in the development of the Kazakh blogosphere. One of the first bloggers in Kazakhstan was a journalist. Blogs also created new communication channels, new journalism styles, and new areas of expression for journalists. Therefore, blogs play an important role in creating a personal space for journalists working in private and state-owned media organizations. They generally find a chance to go beyond the role that the traditional media attributed to the journalists. Literature review shows that a vast majority of Kazakh journalists regularly read blogs, and almost half of them take part in sociopolitical discussions on several blogs. Blog networks also provide a relatively convenient atmosphere for both the Kazakh citizens and journalists with respect to the political opposition.

While there is still a long way to go regarding internet freedom in Kazakhstan, blogs still represent an important part of internet content. Kazakh journalists integrate their blogs into the traditional processes of their professional life and adopt them as new tools used in information dissemination. Previous research with Kazakh journalists shows that blogs pave the way for journalists to move away from their traditional neutral role. Blogs allow a kind of personalization in journalism (Bulatova & Beisenkulov, 2017). Journalists can also provide more information on Kazakhstan's problems than provided by the official and traditional media.

Traditional media is still has a dominant position in Kazakhstan, but this is predicted to change in parallel with the global trends. Today, even the state-owned media organizations in Kazakhstan allow both journalists and readers to write blog posts on their websites. In this regard, blogging activities are predicted to maintain their importance in Kazakh new media in future.

Despite all these, a certain level of state intervention is still in force in Kazakhstan. There are concerns about censorship on the internet in general and social media and blogs in particular. Internet resources are considered within the scope of mass media by Kazakhstan law, and bloggers are held legally responsible even for comments made on their blogs by third parties. In addition, although the Kazakhstan constitution recognizes freedom of expression in mass media, the relatively high number of banned websites shows that there is a certain approach to freedom of expression. However, the legal steps taken by the Kazakhstan government in recent years aim to expand the scope of freedom of expression in digital content. This can be an important development for bloggers across the country, especially for the journalists who engage in such activities.



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