Post COVID-19 Media Trends in Central Asia

Yerkebulan Sairambay[1]

While old media (e.g., print, television, and radio) are heavily censored in Central Asia, new media have seen great promise in recent years. This difference is particularly noticeable among younger generations, who are more online and use digital technologies than older people. A clear example of the popularity of new media is the fact that mainstream media outlets are using social media and online platforms alongside their main media channels. As a result, such practices become the norm. Growing Internet penetration is also another factor influencing this development in the region. New media, such as the Internet, digital technologies and social media, have been developing dramatically in Central Asia in parallel to various socio-political flashpoints since the COronaVIrus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic started. Different strengths of autocracies in these countries might play a significant role in citizens' use of new media. The Russo-Ukrainian war has also been affecting the media landscapes of five stans: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Recent studies (e.g., Sairambay and Kamza 2024, 16) show that Kazakhstani online media outlets have adapted to the war news. This trend can also be observed in all five countries.

According to the Central Asia Barometer (Wave 6, 2019), citizens of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan prefer WhatsApp over other chats and messengers, while IMO is the most popular such media in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, and Telegram is the leader in Uzbekistan. This picture, however, changed towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. WhatsApp became the most used messenger in Tajikistan, while the number of Telegram users in Uzbekistan increased three and half times (Central Asia Barometer, Wave 12, 2022). While Instagram and YouTube were popular in Central Asia before the pandemic (Central Asia Barometer, Wave 6, 2019), by the end of the pandemic, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok also became more popular among citizens of the region (Central Asia Barometer, Wave 12, 2022).

Recent changes in United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding and opportunities around the world due to Trump's new policies have also impacted independent media in Central Asia. Independent media in Central Asia still face multiple challenges, but they are not non-existent. For example, independent media of Turkmenistan, such as Turkmen.news, Gundogar.media, Turkmen Yurt TV, Azatlyk Radiosy, and Chronicles of Turkmenistan, operate from abroad. Similarly, at the citizen level, people know about Virtual Private Network (VPN)

[1] Department of social sciences, SDU University (Kaskelen, Kazakhstan) & Centre for Oriental Studies, University of Tartu. ✉ yerkebulan.sairambay@sdu.edu.kz, orcid.org/0000-0003-2836-4765

and use it to access blocked media in their countries. Furthermore, Russia's 'foreign agent' legislation poses potential impact on independent media in Central Asia. Whilst Kyrgyzstan has already adopted such a law, which imposes strict reporting requirements (Wood 2024), Kazakhstan lawmakers have proposed Russian-style 'foreign agent' law for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and media (Pokidaev 2025).

At the II Central Asian Media Forum in Astana, the Minister of Culture and Information of Kazakhstan, Aida Balayeva, emphasized that the Central Asian countries intend to create a joint TV channel and media platform (Keskin 2025):

The issue of intensifying cooperation in the information sphere has been repeatedly discussed at the level of Central Asian leaders. […] Thus, at present, the countries of Central Asia are considering the possibility of launching a joint television channel and a regional media platform aimed at strengthening information cooperation in the region.

Such intentions might signify both regional cooperation for the creation of joint media products and tightening media in a cross-national level. Joint media projects might stimulate not only regional development of the information space, but also increase the authority of state propaganda and legitimacy in comparison with national media of individual countries.

One very positive development in the region is that all Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan have fact-checking platforms: Factcheck.kz and Stopfake.kz in Kazakhstan, Factcheck.kg in Kyrgyzstan, Factcheck.tj in Tajikistan, and Factcheck.uz in Uzbekistan. These websites provide analyses of news, social-media claims, and public statements, broadening regional effort to verify information and combat misinformation and disinformation. Accountability and transparency in society, resulting from public outrage through social media, are becoming common practice (Sairambay 2023, 120), sometimes leading to cancel culture.

In recent years, Central Asia has prioritised raising media literacy among ordinary people to combat disinformation and misinformation. From 17 to 21 June 2024, journalists and bloggers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan 'gained expertise in online product design, deep fake detection, cyber hygiene, and open data' in an OSCE Central Asian Summer Media School called 'InfoSavvy: AI-Expedition and Media Literacy' (Zhanybekov and Almazbekova 2024). Similarly, from 24 to 31 October 2024, the Media Literacy Caravan information campaign – funded by the European Union and carried out by Internews – was run simultaneously in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (internews.kg 2024). Such trend of media literacy campaigns is likely to continue in the region in the information age, especially in parallel with the recent development of artificial intelligence.

In conclusion, recent media trends in Central Asia are shaped by different challenges and opportunities of the digital age, geopolitical flashpoints, and legislative actions, and regime

types. As new media, artificial intelligence, and technology evolve and permeate people's daily lives, stakeholders including governments, NGOs, and opposition seek similar influence through media. If before the COVID-19 pandemic, media in each country developed along their own trajectories, then after the pandemic, it seems that the cooperative path of development is becoming increasingly popular.

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