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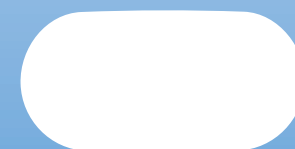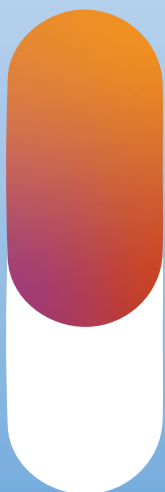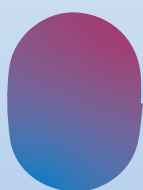I W P R
ИНСТИТУТ ПО ОСВЕЩЕНИЮ ВОЙНЫ И МИРА

ONLINE NEWS CONSUMPTION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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RESEARCH

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Institute for War and Peace Reporting Central Asia (IWPR CA)
2019

ONLINE NEWS CONSUMPTION IN CENTRAL ASIA

This research was conducted as part of a project by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting entitled "Development of New Media and Digital Journalism in Central Asia". The project's goal is to strengthen media capacity to produce impartial and objective content that is sensitive to gender-related issues.

Project activities included capacity building for students and lecturers at four university journalism faculties in four Central Asian countries; enhancing the use of digital platforms by Central Asian media outlets; and forming a professional network for students of media studies and professionals in the field.

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BRIEF SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In recent years, the share of internet users as well as users of social networks, news websites, instant messengers and smartphone applications has grown significantly in Central Asia, affecting the way in which media content is created and consumed in the region.

Within this context, the number of misinformation and disinformation media content as well as "clickbait" headlines to attract more website traffic has increased. Additionally, there are growing concerns on the level of Media and Information Literacy amongst populations and journalists themselves in Central Asia, affecting the ways in which media is created, consumed and disseminated.

Our research, conducted in 2019, is the first ever attempt in Central Asia to measure online news consumption models. The research focused on understanding patterns of online news consumption and the ways in which respondents in the region access and obtain their media content. The key findings were as follows:

• Social networks predominate as news sources. Facebook remains the leading social network for news in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, people are much more likely to use Instagram.

• News communication and sharing has become more private as instant messaging services improve their usability and algorithms from year to year, gaining more popularity. The most popular messaging services for exchanging and receiving news items are WhatsApp, Viber and Telegram.

• The demand for news in local languages[1] is growing, but the main language for reading the news is Russian. According to experts, this is due to the fact that most media outlets are concentrated in the countries' capitals where Russian is spoken predominantly and where most consumers of online media are urban residents. Most social networks offer content in Russian. Also, local media outlets in countries are slowly adapting to the changing trends of new media and the technical difficulties faced by some with Internet access.

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[1] Local languages are henceforth to be understood as Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek. Although Russian is also a local language in the region (for example, it has official status in Kyrgyzstan), the term "local languages" excludes Russian for the purposes of this report, so as to indicate the linguistic preferences of internet users in their place of residence. "Local news" hereby refers to news concerning a specific area, city, district or village.

• Social Journalism, Ecology, Science and Technology are trending themes. At the same time, respondents feel that news topics on science, technology, and the environment are the least represented, or are missing from online publications.

• Official (state) websites and news agencies are the most trusted in the region. In cases of conflicting information about the same event, the majority of respondents trust the veracity of information from these sources.

• Respondents most frequently draw their own conclusions about the veracity of new information by checking its relevance or by searching for other sources and comparing the information. At the same time, almost nobody (95 per cent of all respondents) in the four countries surveyed use special applications for fact checking.

• This research has also revealed a low awareness of conflict and gender sensitivity among the population. Only one third of respondents were familiar with such phenomena as "hate speech" or "hateful rhetoric" in the media.

• There were notable gender gaps identified on internet usage, from the data and wider evidence gathered, in the four Central Asian countries (which is partly reflected in the respondents' distribution in our survey). International research demonstrates that worldwide, according to various estimates, women are 25 per cent to 50 percent less likely to have access to the internet than men. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan do not yet participate in international research projects on internet access, but studies on Facebook's targeted advertising audience indirectly demonstrate a gender gap in internet access in these countries, and not one to women's advantage.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

University Journalism Faculties:
• Consider studying social networks and instant messengers as a separate topic in university curriculums and multimedia journalism programmes. Social networks and IMs should be seen as a different method for distributing media content requiring different distribution standards compared to traditional forms such as radio, newspapers and television.

• Introduce new or update existing curricula to contain conflict-sensitive and gender-sensitive journalism modules.

• Improve current journalists' socialisation skills and nurture future journalists as micro-influencers with new skills and the ability to apply professional journalism standards when working with social networks.

Media News Outlets:
• Increase the capacity of media news outlets to build a media production strategy, including a strategy for maintaining social networks pages.

• Change approaches to Journalism: from a simple presentation of news, to telling significant stories and explaining events to help audiences understand the processes with the extraction and analysis of data, visualisation, etc.

• Conduct long-term content analysis of media publications (including social networks pages): to monitor news content on dis/misinformation, conflict and gender sensitivity (i.e. tone and perspective of news content/headlines) available in Central Asia. The analysis could also be useful for journalists as it will enable them to track changes and trends in the Media sphere.

• Pay attention to the gender gap in rates of internet access and consumption of news materials, to support girls and women with special programmes, especially in rural areas of Central Asian countries, in order to facilitate their greater social inclusion and combat the digital gender divide.

• Create and distribute a glossary, textbook, or guide on gender and conflict sensitive topics in order to improve the audience's potential ability to recognise negative content.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, information technology has rapidly changed the social fabric of our lives and digitalised all possible areas: from e-government, education, economy, banking system, healthcare, elections, and to citizenship itself. However, this digitalisation of society brings not only new technologies, but also presents a new instrument of state and non-state actor control.

These new digital realities have, as a result, significantly affected journalism and communication in Central Asia, changing patterns of news consumption in the process. A new form of media has emerged, one which has created a unique relationship with its consumers, where "the user interacts with the source of information and independently decides on what, where, how to search and choose, how to interpret, when to stop and who to trust..." [2]

Experts have described two main trends in the transition towards a new model of media consumption.[3] Firstly, media has become increasingly personalised, or in other words, focuses on the needs of specific consumers. For example, the model of collective use of one device by a single family, i.e. a TV at home, that is controlled by whoever holds the remote, is now obsolete.

A serious transformation has taken place, leading to the emergence of individual and communities of media consumers. Through their unique needs and preferences, they themselves shape the content offered via screens on their tablets, laptops, smartphones and even watches.

Consequently, requests for text visualisation have grown significantly as well. Users expect new forms of data journalism with video and audio components, featuring animations, infographics and representations of statistics, graphs and diagrams.

Ever since the 'blogging' format emerged in 2004, blogs and bloggers have revolutionised news consumption. Blogs have clearly competed with traditional media, providing an alternative position, a quicker response to audience's demands for information, and a comments option, which allowed authors to personally respond to audience's messages. Bloggers, often multilingual, have created a special media environment alongside news publications, combining various techniques. This individual "media" could report the news in extraordinary ways, accompanied by deep analysis and a high level of emotional engagement. That was exactly what the audience needed.

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[2] Multimedia journalism: handbook for the higher education institutions (Mul'timedijnaja zhurnalistika: uchebnik dlja vuzov). Ed. Kachkaeva A. G., Shomova S.A., Higher School of Economics, Moscow, 2017.
[3] Ibid

The core principles of news media before the widespread emergence of multimedia were novelty, objectivity, efficiency, and relevance. As the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan put it: "the medium is the message." [4]

Today's multimedia news sources stay true to these principles, but they have also added a few more: mobility, interactivity, and detachment from distance and time. They also have a greater ability to influence the agenda of the day, to work directly with primary and secondary sources, provide greater detail, context, and visualisation, work with captioned video, online broadcasting, VR (virtual and augmented reality) and many other technologies convenient for the multiscreen* consumer.

In Central Asia, traditional media sources still exist, but struggle with new media for the market share of consumers of consumers. Television, radio and newspapers remain in demand, especially in rural areas and remote regions. While alternative media exist, urban residents keep using traditional media forms. However, the limited resources of the latter and their dependence on the state drives consumers towards using social networks and instant messaging services to access information. While Central Asian countries still lag behind most states with advanced economies and high rates of internet usage, they have made progress in recent years.

Yet IT giants are undermining news businesses around the world, and Central Asia is no exception. The speed of information distribution, its growing volume and, most importantly, the ability to rapidly alternate between different media channels have completely changed the perception of journalistic norms and practices.

Today, news content is online, available 24/7, and interactive. This forces news makers to keep informed about their consumers' reactions, comments and preferences. Social networks and instant messengers have become a primary source of information and updates about current events, a development *"equally affecting both the freedom of information dissemination and the distribution of fake information, misinformation and propaganda."* [5]

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[4] "the medium is the message" - famous quotation by Marshall McLuhan
[5] from this point onward, quotes from expert interviews during the research are in italics
* definitions of the words marked with this sign are contained in the glossary

Journalists and news outlets need to adapt to the current situation and the digital challenges it poses. Doing so requires a thorough review of the work of editors and journalists in an environment of intense competition with other, more attractive media forms and the so-called "attraction" (entertainment) factor of the digital environment. Importantly, a heightened awareness of these trends is crucial for lecturers at journalism faculties and their students.

Crucially, the relevance of studying these new patterns of news consumption lies in the fact that news outlets cannot be left uncontrolled; they are at the core of states' informational agendas.

Special techniques exist for influencing public opinion and social engineering, in which the new media environment plays an important role. On the one hand, these techniques make it possible for states to consolidate society around a certain agenda. On the other hand, they present opportunities to create a special virtual world involving everyone in solving the problems in a village, city and country through participation in discussions and comments in social networks.

The Reuters[6] Institute for the Study of Journalism monitors world news consumption trends and annually identifies tendencies and changes. It is worth noting that neither Russia, nor China, nor the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia are included in the list of countries surveyed by the institute. More often than not, the Central Asian media environment is surveyed country by country, identifying the media preferences of population as a whole. However, studies of news consumption concerning new forms of media* have not yet been conducted. Understanding the specifics of media consumption through deeper research on the characteristics of the influence of new media forms on patterns of news consumption will help identify problems and formulate recommendations urgently needed by journalists and media outlets in Central Asia today.

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[6] "Digital News Report, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, www.digitalnewsreport.org

RESEARCH GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The goal of this research was to identify the main trends in online news consumption among Central Asians.

The project aimed to achieve the following objectives:

• To identify models of online news consumption by main sources, format, genres and topics;

• To establish the levels of awareness of gender and conflict sensitivity;

• To analyse patterns of social media usage by news agencies.

The research covered four Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, except Turkmenistan.[7]

The main method of research was an online survey in which:

• Field research phase was completed in 30 days (May-June 2019).

• The survey was conducted as a semi-formalised self-reported online questionnaire in five languages: Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Russian, Tajik and Uzbek.

• The questionnaire was distributed through partner news agencies, social networks, instant messaging services, email newsletters, posters, advertising banners, etc.

In addition, the research includes the results of in-depth interviews with 20 new media experts with an understanding of the regional and local dynamics of news media, as well as an analysis of channels (profiles) of news media across social networks.

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[7] The study does not cover Turkmenistan for objective reasons.

SAMPLING

The study is novel for the region due to the techniques it employed in attracting respondents; the sample was formed using the river sampling method.

River sampling is an online research technique in which respondents are sampled among internet users in real-time for a specific survey.

The advantages of the river sampling method for this research are as follows:

• It is well suited for surveying a specific target group (in our case, online news consumers), especially due to the unavailability of a general aggregate number of people consuming news online.

• It allows for the collection of fragmented data on information consumption across different platforms (for example, on social networks, instant messaging services, applications and websites).

• It concerns an audience that by definition already has internet access and allows them to attracting other real users.

• It facilitates the collection of a large number of responses in a short time period and provides access to a potentially unlimited target group of respondents.

Since the goal of the survey was to identify trends in online news consumption, respondents were selected with a view to excluding those who do not consume news online. Thus, the survey covers only those who read, listen to or watch news materials online: on websites, mobile applications, social networks, blogs, video channels and other online tools. This limitation was indicated in the survey.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS

Due to the low penetration of the internet in rural areas in all countries, the sampling shifted towards internet users from urban areas.

In addition, women are represented less in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. We tried to address these limitations by increasing the number of personalised messages through groups in direct messaging services, as well as targeting* women on all online platforms used to distribute the questionnaire.

It is important to note that online surveys often do not reflect the behaviour patterns of audiences that are not present online (older people, people with low incomes or limited access to formal education).

The total number of respondents of the online survey amounted to **4,130**. The share of respondents from Kyrgyzstan was 31.5 per cent, from Kazakhstan – 24.3 per cent, from Uzbekistan – 23.5 per cent, and from Tajikistan – 20.7 per cent.

Most respondents (57 per cent) were young people of 19 to 32 years of age. The smallest group was respondents aged 43 and older (Table No. 1).
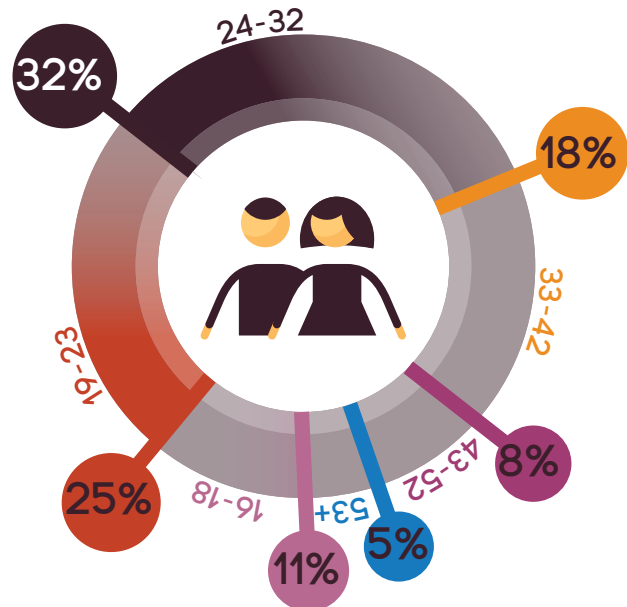
Table No. 1. Distribution of Respondents by Age

A total of 1,572 women and 2,558 men were surveyed; the share of women in the entire sampling was 38 per cent.

The share of women surveyed in Kazakhstan is the highest – 57 per cent. In Kyrgyzstan, it amounted to 40 per cent. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the number of surveyed women was almost three times less than men: their share of the total number of respondents was 24 per cent and 28 per cent, respectively (Table No. 2).
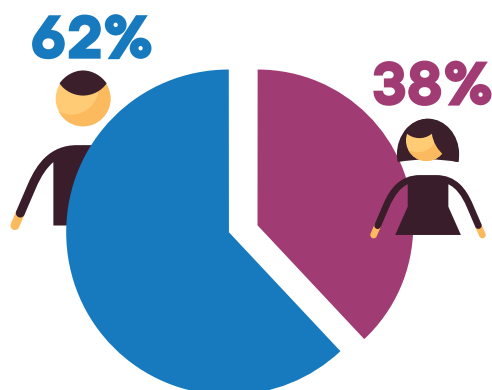
62% 38%

Table No. 2. Distribution of Respondents by Sex

28% 57% 24% 40%

Table No. 2. Distribution of Respondents by Sex

KEY RESULTS OF ONLINE SURVEY

INTERNET PENETRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

The internet penetration rate in Central Asia, according to the Digital Report[8] from the We Are Social portal, is estimated at 50 per cent[9] from an overall population of 72 million.[10]

According to data from Internet World Stats,[11] as of 30 June 2019, Kazakhstan is the leader in Internet penetration rate in the region, where three out of four people have access to Internet. In Uzbekistan, only half of the population has access to the global network. In Kyrgyzstan, this rate is just over 40 per cent, and Tajikistan and Turkmenistan close the list, where less than a third of the population use the Internet (Table No. 3).

Internet World Stats data indicate that the penetration rate of social media networks in Central Asia stands at 21 per cent among people over 13 years old. Data from We Are Social show that in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, 30 per cent to 40 per cent of active Internet users are registered on such social media networks, and half of them have constant access via mobile phones. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, social networks are less popular: their penetration rate ranges from five per cent to six per cent (Table No. 4).
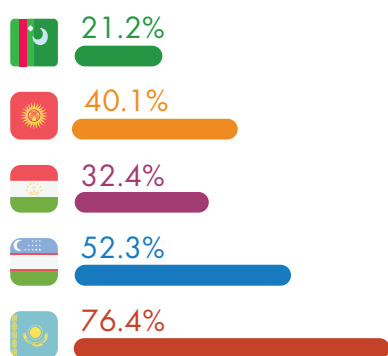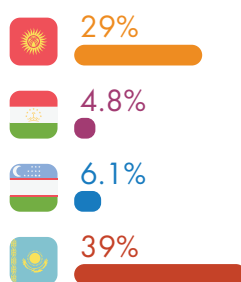
Internet	Social Networks	Social Networks via Smartphones
21.2%		
40.1%	29%	16%
32.4%	4.8%	2.6%
52.3%	6.1%	3.1%
76.4%	39%	19%
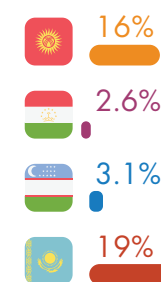
Table No. 3. Population and Internet Penetration Rate by Country
Source: Internet World Stats

Table No. 4. Social Media Network Penetration Rate by Country
Source: We Are Social

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[8] Digital in 2019. We are social, 2019: https://wearesocial.com/global-digital-report-2019/
[9] Penetration rate in relation to the total population, regardless of age
[10] Population and distribution by the region according to the UN
[11] Internet World Stats: https://www.internetworldstats.com/

INTERNET ACCESS

Digitalisation not only stimulates the expansion of knowledge and availability of information, but also encourages society to more actively participate in political life. On one hand, Central Asian countries, with their socioeconomic inequality, are forced to follow global trends of democratisation in order to not lag behind in digital development. On the other hand, in doing so they create a weak socioeconomic model balanced with artificial obstacles, such as poor internet connectivity, high cost of internet access, and so on.

According to Freedom House's Freedom in the World[12] report for 2019, Kyrgyzstan is among those countries with a "partially free Internet," making it the only country in Central Asia with no restrictions on access to news websites and social media networks. Users in other countries in the region face difficulties accessing news websites, Google services and social media networks.[13]

Experts note that only a small part of the urban population in the countries surveyed knows how to bypass restrictions on the internet by using VPNs. Considering that

VPNs* and other anonymising tools require faster internet speeds, using them becomes a problem for rural areas where internet access often fails and, in general, internet penetration remains low. All these factors affect the development of new media sources in the region.

Restricting access to social media networks also leads to news media losing their subscribers. At the same time, according to experts, this stimulates these media outlets into developing alternative channels and platforms to reach their audiences, or becoming multiplatform media outlets.

Another consequence of these restrictions, low internet speeds, and high costs for operating news media is heightened difficulty in working with new formats (interactive tests, infographics, data visualisation). Despite this, the popularity of various social media networks and instant messengers is increasing, experts note.

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[12] Freedom in the World. Freedom House, 2019: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Feb2019_FH_FITW_2019_Report_ForWeb-compressed.pdf

[13] How Internet access is blocked in Central Asian countries. Asia-Plus, 2019: https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/20190528/kak-blokiruetsya-internet-v-stranah-tsentralnoi-azii

INTERNET USERS' GLOBAL GENDER GAP

In the world today, there is a significant gender gap among Internet users in terms of their rates of access to global information networks, as revealed by many international studies.

The 2019 Inclusive Internet Index,[14] a research project conducted by The Economist, indicates that in 84 out of the 100 countries researched the internet access rate is higher for men than for women.[15] On average, men are 24.8 per cent more likely to have access to the internet than women. These rates are typical for developing countries: in 28 of the countries surveyed, women's access to the internet is generally not considered to be a priority, and no gender inclusive measures are included in policies to expand access.

Similarly, research conducted by the World Wide Web Foundation[16] in nine large cities across nine developing countries (Colombia, India, Kenya and others) reveals that in low-income countries, internet access is available for women for 50 per cent lower than for men; only 37 per cent of women compared to 59 per cent of men were able to participate in the survey. A separate research project[17] conducted in African countries shows that even taking into account current trends of internet penetration, by 2020 more than 71 per cent of African girls and women will still not be online; this represents a 26 per cent gender gap in internet access.

Many factors negatively affect women and girls' access to the internet. The main factor is money: the income gap between men and women gives the latter fewer financial resources to pay for internet access. Importantly, even if a woman does get internet access, her expenses are on average 17 per cent lower[18] (especially on mobile devices).

Another obstacle is the lack of education and skills to use mobile devices and other technology to access the internet. Some women simply do not understand the important role the internet can play in educating themselves, a view reinforced by gender stereotypes and cultural norms that prevail in many societies. Furthermore, the lack of content tailored to their needs and interests, the prevalence of online harassment and general aggression from other Internet users make women reticent to get online.

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[14] The Inclusive Internet Index 2019, Executive Summary. The Economist intelligence unit, 2019: https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com/assets/external/downloads/3i-executive-summary.pdf
[15] Kazakhstan was the only Central Asian country included in this research.
[16] Women's Rights Online: Translating Access into Empowerment. World Wide Web Foundation. Global Report, October 2015: http://webfoundation.org/docs/2015/10/womens-rights-online21102015.pdf
[17] Making The Connection: How internet access could help lift women and girls out of poverty. ONE, 2016: https://s3.amazonaws.com/one.org/pdfs/making-the-connection-report-en.pdf
[18] The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019. GSM Association, 2019: https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2019.pdf

THE ONLINE GENDER GAP IN CENTRAL ASIA

With the exception of Kazakhstan, there is at present no reliable sources of information on rates of internet access for men and women in Central Asia. According to the International Telecommunication Union,[19] 80 per cent of men and 77.9 per cent of women in Kazakhstan were active Internet users in 2018: while this does show a gender gap, it is a small one.

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan do not yet participate in international research on internet access rates and do not provide open data on web users. One of the few such studies in Tajikistan, conducted by the World Bank in 2009,[20] revealed "a vast and statistically significant gap in access to the internet and email between male and female entrepreneurs."

At the same time, there are indirect indicators that allow us to assess gender differences in internet usage. According to the We Are Social Portal's Digital Report,[21] the female percentage of Facebook's targeted advertising audience in Kazakhstan is 54 per cent and 49 per cent in Kyrgyzstan. A large gender gap can be observed in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan: 33 per cent and 27 per cent, respectively (Table No. 5).

28% — 33%
22% — 27%
48% — 49%
57% — 54%
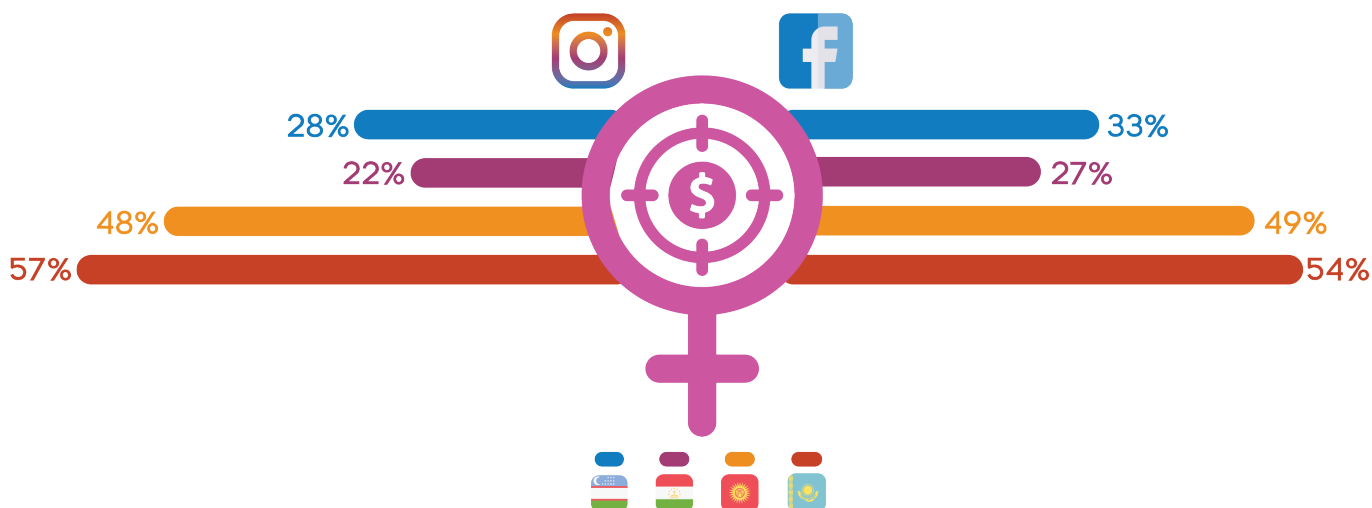
Table No. 5. Female Targeted Advertising Audience on Facebook and Instagram.
Percentage of Total Advertising Audience
Source: We Are Social

[19] ITU World Telecommunication https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx
[20] Sarosh Sattar. Opportunities for men and women in an emerging Europe and Central Asia. WB, 2012: http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/479131468250293544/pdf/659310WP00PUBL065737B0Gender0Report.pdf
[21] Digital in 2019. We are social, 2019: https://wearesocial.com/global-digital-report-2019/

Another indirect benchmark of women's internet access can be established by examining Global Findex indicators.

Global Findex is a research project conducted in more than 140 countries around the world (including Central Asia) in order to assess populations' financial literacy, as well as their level of knowledge of financial tools. In addition, Global Findex separately analyses rates of internet usage to conclude various transactions, such as purchases, loans, payments and bank accounts, among others.[22]

Analysis of Global Findex's 2018 data reveals quite significant gender differences in Central Asians' likelihood to conduct various financial operations online. For the purposes of this study, we do not intend to interpret the Global Findex indicators themselves; we are more interested in the audience gender gap (Table No. 6).

Indeed, according to these online payment indicators, in 2017, men and women in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan had roughly equal access to the internet. At the same time, there is a noticeable gender gap in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. On average, in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, 5.5 per cent

fewer women use the Internet to make online purchases and other payments. It is important to remember that these indicators reflect a gender gap not only in internet access, but also in access to financial accounts, money management, and so on. Nevertheless, the result is the same: there is a clear gender gap in internet usage statistics for the region, which is partly reflected by the respondents' distribution in our survey (Table No. 2).

25% 24%   5% 5%   10% 15%   4% 10%
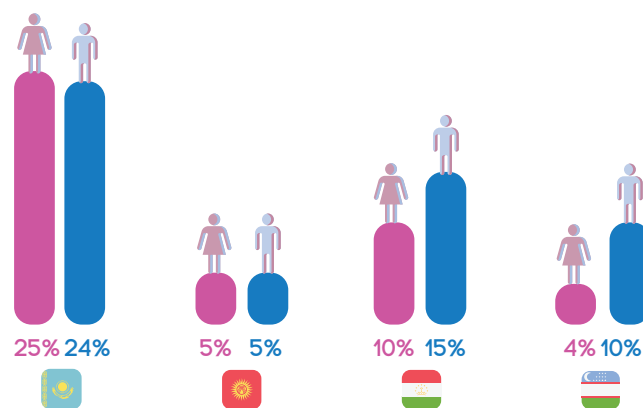
Table No. 6. Using the Internet for Paying Bills, Making Online Purchases and Other Transactions. Percentage of People Over 15 Years Old
Source: Global Findex-2017

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[22] Global Findex Database. World Bank, 2017: https://globalfindex.worldbank.org/

ONLINE PLATFORMS AS NEWS SOURCES

Social Networks Prevail, Messaging Services Gaining Popularity as News Sources in Central Asia

An analysis of online news sources has not revealed significant differences by country. At the same time, social networks prevail and messaging services are gaining popularity as news sources in Central Asia. The following trends indicate this (Table No. 7):

Nine out of ten respondents "always" or "often" consume news through social networks. News websites trail behind social networks in this regard: the share of respondents viewing news on news websites ranges from 75 per cent to 82 per cent, while news on social networks is viewed on average by 90 per cent of respondents. Moreover, the younger the respondents are, the more they prefer social networks; the older the respondents, the more often they read news on news websites. This trend is shared by all countries in the region.

Social networks
92% 90% 88% 87%

News websites
82% 82% 76% 75%

Messaging services
85% 69% 63% 55%

Table No. 7. Online Platforms as News Sources,
Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Always" and "Often"
Source: IWPR CA

Furthermore, messaging services are gaining popularity as news sources and occupy a stable third place in preferred sources of news. On average, seven out of ten respondents indicated that they "always" and "often" read news from social networks' instant messaging services. This method of news consumption comes before official sites, news media applications, blogs and YouTube channels.
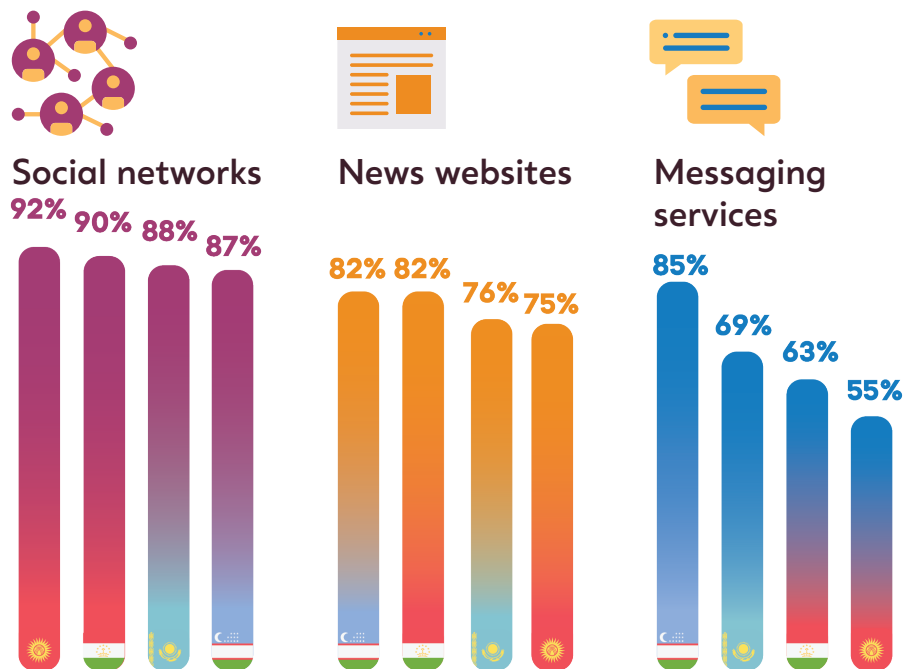
It is important to note that news consumption* through instant messaging services is particularly popular in Uzbekistan, where six out of 10 respondents "always" consume news through such instant messengers; the combined share of "always" and "often" amounts to 85 per cent.

Similar news consumption indicators can be observed in South African and Latin American countries such as Chile and Brazil,[23] where social networks and instant messaging services are also the populations' main sources of news.[24]

Applications
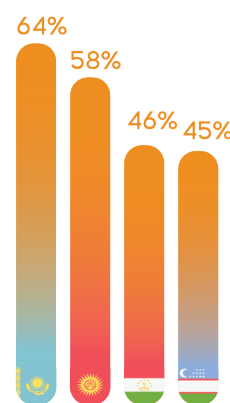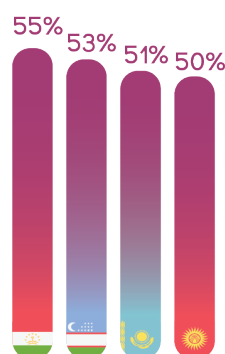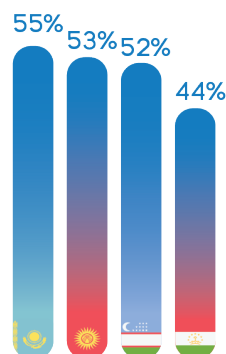
64% 62% 61% 57%

YouTube channels

64% 58% 46% 45%

Official websites

55% 53% 51% 50%

Blogs

55% 53% 52% 44%

Table No. 7. Online Platforms as News Sources, Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Always" and "Often"
Source: IWPR CA

[23] Digital News Report, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, www.digitalnewsreport.org
[24] Other indicators prevail in Western countries. For example, in European countries (Finland, Norway, Sweden) it is typical for consumers to receive news directly from news websites, for East Asian countries (Japan, Taiwan, South Korea) - through aggregators and search engines, while the US population consumes news almost equally from all platforms.

Instagram, Facebook and VKontakte appear to be the most convenient social networks for receiving news content; WhatsApp, Telegram and Viber are the most popular among instant messaging services (Tables No. 8 and No. 9).

82%
70%

89%
83%

VK
61%
35%
38%
26%

OK
19%
26%
25%
24%

Twitter
22%
23%
26%
19%
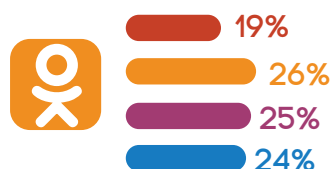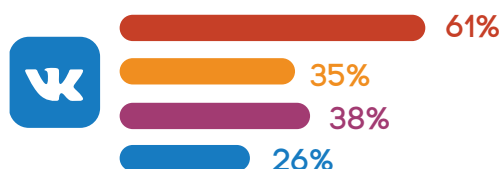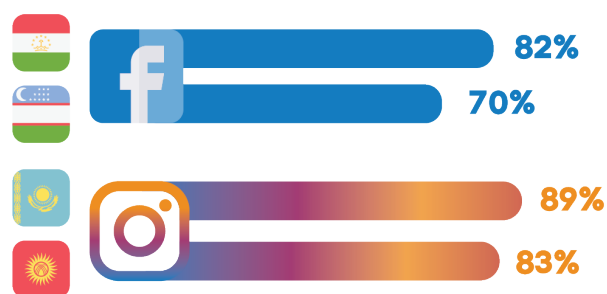
Table No. 8. Social Networks as News Sources, Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Always" and "Often"
Source: IWPR CA

Of all social networks, Facebook is the most valued for its news content in all four countries; Telegram comes first among instant messaging services. In Uzbekistan, Telegram (54 per cent) is also valued for its user-friendly interface.

This is partly confirmed by the results of the Telegram Analytics[25] research: the majority of the Russian-speaking audience in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan reads news channels on Telegram.

83%
52%
12%

78%
55%
12%

61% 62%
49%

97%
23%
11%
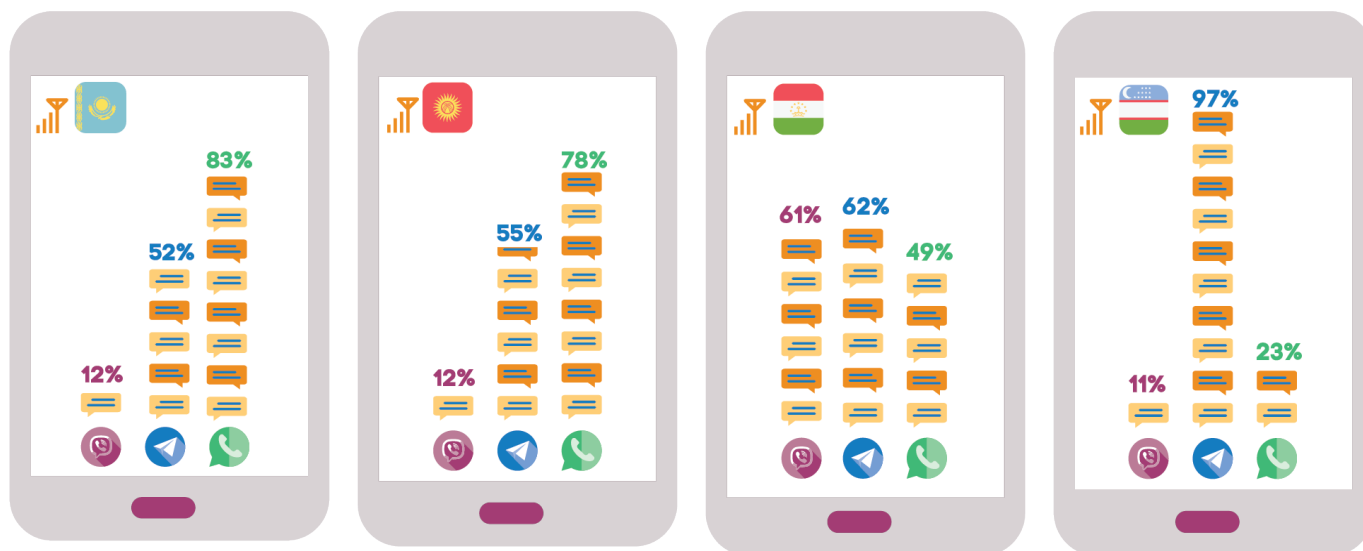
Table No. 9. Messengers as News Sources, Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Always" and "Often"
Source: IWPR CA

[25] Telegram audience research. Telegram Analytics, 2019: https://tgstat.ru/research

Meanwhile, experts confirm that news outlets have lost their monopoly on news: *"Journalists themselves learn about events from the social network users. In this regard, news journalism loses out to social network users who cover the scene of events with smartphones."* At the same time, this can undermine the information's reliability; due to such prompt availability, journalists do not always verify the information they receive; this in turn offers an opportunity to groups to disseminate false information to advance their own goals. Consequently, journalists' audiences do not always receive the information they require.

The prevalence of social networks also compels journalists to create their own audiences, *"to be a popular person on social networks so that people read and wait for [their] material."* Columns are a good mechanism for cultivating such journalistic micro-influencers,* meaning that journalists write regularly, albeit still in accordance with journalistic standards, and approach their presence on instant messaging services and social networks in the same spirit.

> **Most of news or other information is distributed through messengers, the so-called 'grey zone' of the Internet. People prefer to message news to each other instead of sharing it on the pages of social networks.**

> News media are losing to social networks in promptness, there is no point transmitting short news updates, as it was before. We must produce more explanations of events, produce our own content.

> Today, blogging is becoming an alternative 'news' project, which also operates according to the principles and standards of classic news websites.
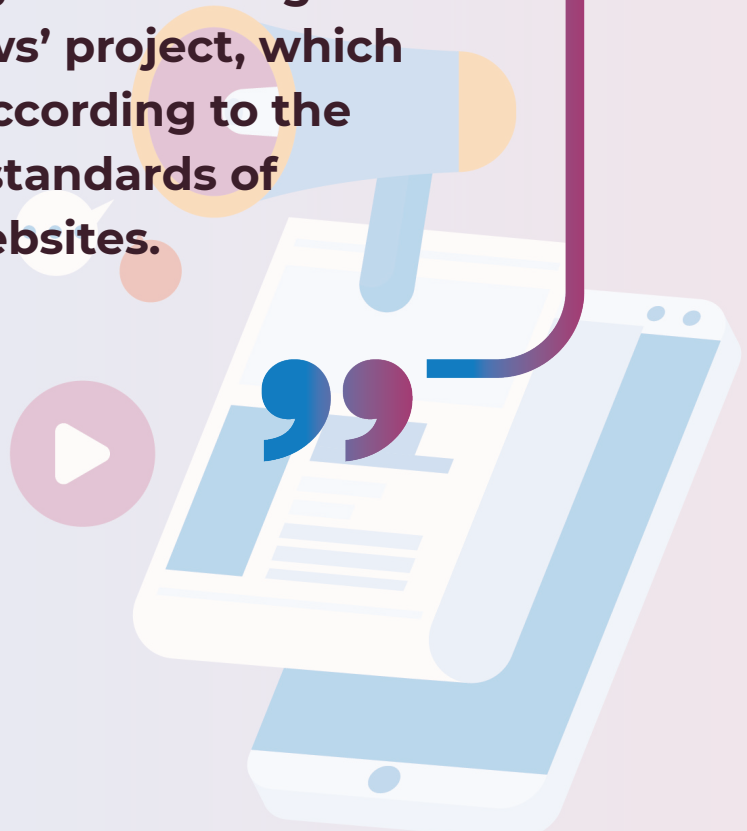
CHOICES AND PREFERENCES IN NEWS CONTENT

Demand for More News in Local Languages

Users' language preferences for news content reveal certain trends about the internet in Central Asia. Importantly, t**he main language for reading online news in Central Asia is Russian**. On average, over half of the respondents indicated that they read news mainly in Russian. Local languages are less popular (Table No. 10).

According to experts, this is due to the fact that most media outlets are concentrated in the capitals of Central Asian countries; accordingly, most consumers of online media are still urban residents, despite the growth of online news consumption in rural areas. Most social networks offer content in Russian, thus targeting the majority of news consumers.

Nevertheless, experts from Kazakhstan note that despite the predominance of search requests in Russian, the number of requests for news items in Kazak is growing. This trend continues despite the relative lack of online news content in the language. In rural and remote regions of Kyrgyzstan, the consumption of news through social media is increasing, although the inhabitants of such areas tend to comment on online content in Kyrgyz. Experts note that news items originally written in Kyrgyz are more popular than those translated from Russian.

In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, blogs offering content only in the Tajik and Uzbek languages respectively are more popular than Russian language sources.
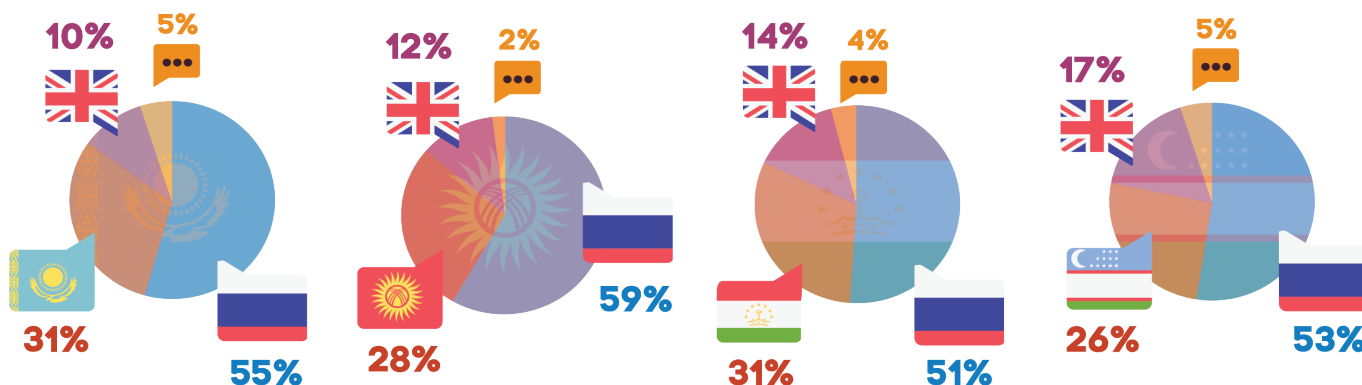
Table No. 10. Choice of News Content Language, Percentage of Respondents
Source: IWPR CA

Young Central Asians read news in English more often than their elders and prefer news from international agencies and publications. On average, 16 per cent of young people aged between 16 and 23 consume news in English, and this proportion decreases with age (Table No. 11).

A similar age trend appears when sorting news consumption by type of news publications: the younger the respondent, the more he or she prefers international and foreign publications. This is due to the fact that younger age groups tend to have better English language skills, making news content in the language more accessible to them.
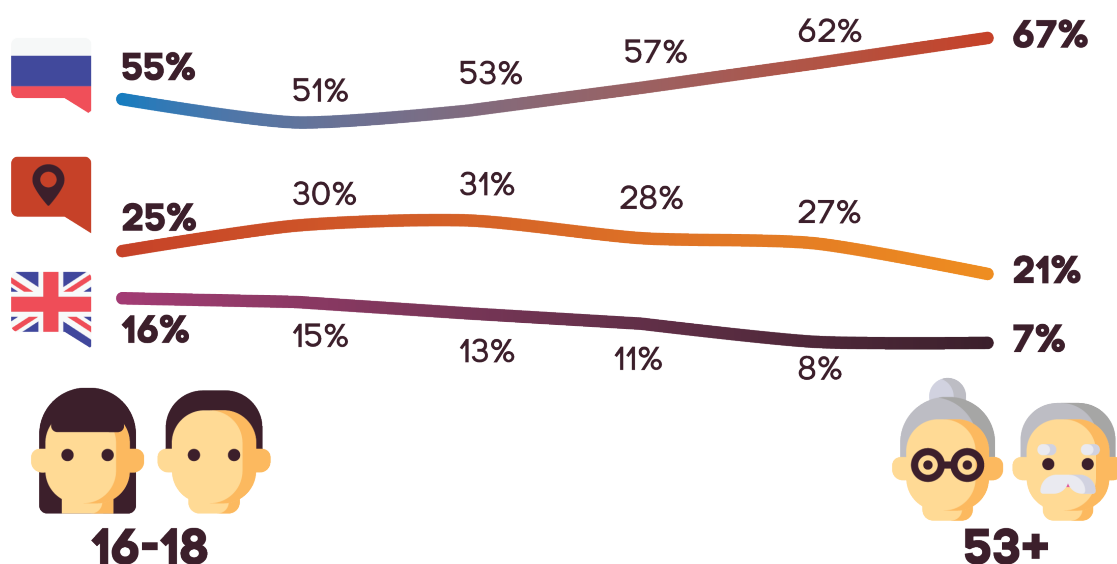
55%   51%   53%   57%   62%   67%
25%   30%   31%   28%   27%   21%
16%   15%   13%   11%   8%   7%

16-18   53+

Table No. 11. Language Preferences for News Content by Age Group, Percentage of Respondents
Source: IWPR CA

Kazakhstan

- Russian: 16-18: 47% → 53+: 67%
- Kazakh: 16-18: 37% → 53+: 24%
- English: 16-18: 12% → 53+: 4%

Kyrgyzstan

- Russian: 16-18: 62% — 56.3% — 53+: 65%
- Kyrgyz: 16-18: 24% — 31% — 53+: 27%
- English: 16-18: 13% — 7% — 53+: 8.5%

Tajikistan

- Russian: 16-18: 59% — 51% — 53+: 55%
- Tajik: 16-18: 19% — 28% — 53+: 22%
- English: 16-18: 17% — 19% — 53+: 12%

Uzbekistan

- Russian: 16-18: 52% — 45% — 53+: 81%
- Uzbek: 16-18: 22% — 36% — 53+: 10%
- English: 16-18: 21% — 53+: 4%
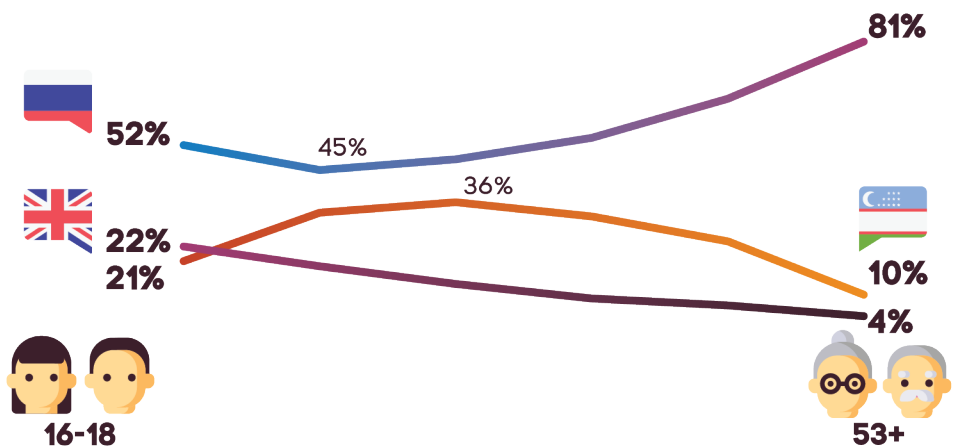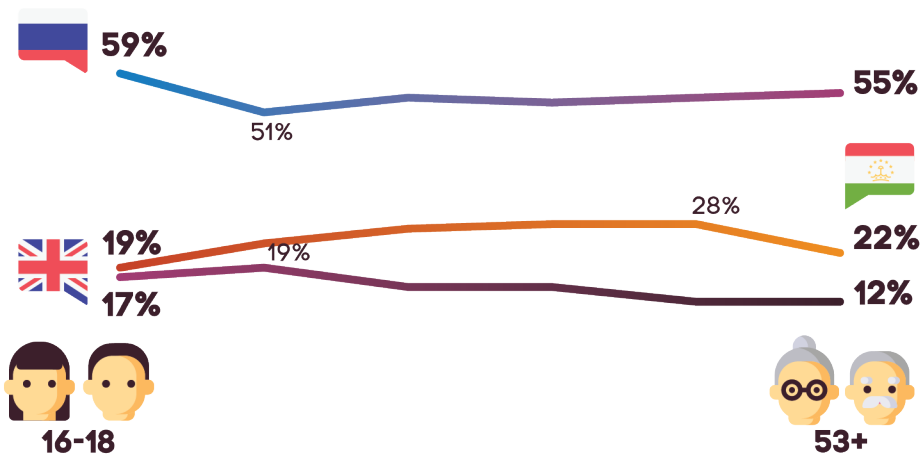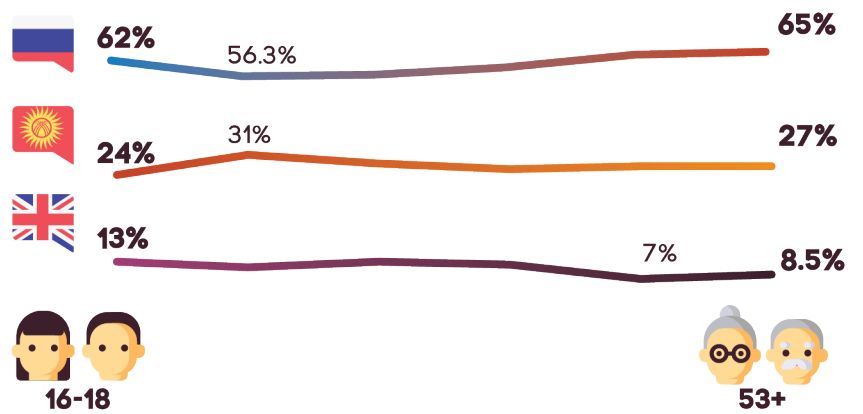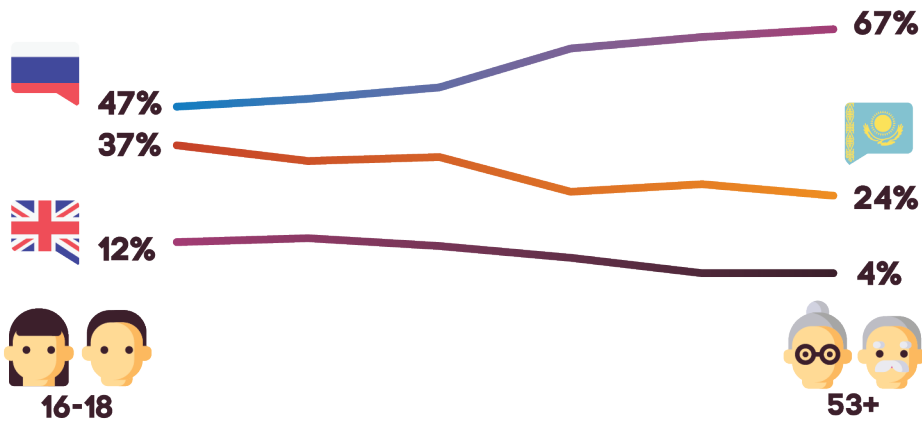
Table No. 11. Language Preferences for News Content by Age Group, Percentage of Respondents Source: IWPR CA

Nationwide News Sources Prevail, Local and Regional News Lag Behind

On average, eight out of 19 respondents prefer to read news related to events in their country as a whole. A third of respondents said that they read local and regional news "rarely" and "very rarely" (Tables No. 12 and No. 13).

85%   84%   84%   85%

77%   81%   75%   70%

36%
32%
32%
26%

46%
40%
32%
27%
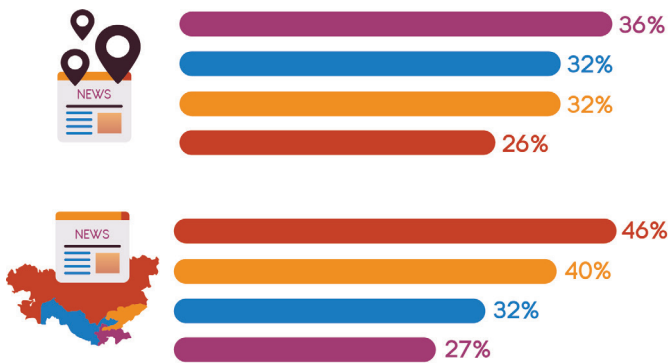
Table No. 13. News Consumption by Type, Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Rarely" and "Very Rarely"
Source: IWPR CA
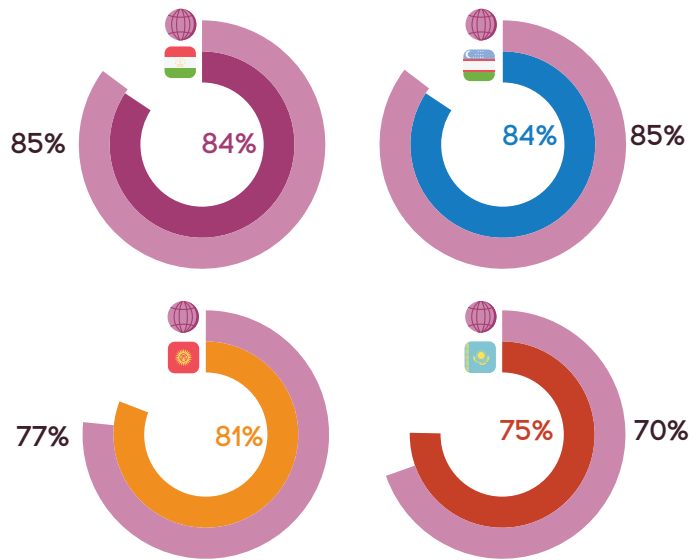
Table No. 12. News Consumption by Type, Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Always" and "Often"
Source: IWPR CA

Experts note that local media outlets are slowly adapting to the changing media environment, given technical difficulties with internet access. Researchers interpret these statistics as a signal that there is indeed demand for local and regional content in local languages. This phenomenon must be analysed qualitatively and quantitatively in future research.

> **Information in the local language mostly serves as an entertainment resource, where topics with little societal relevance are discussed. In terms of the state's information security, we should strive to increase the amount of news content available in the Kazakh language.**

> **Previously, social networks and messaging services were used as entertainment in rural areas, also allowing people to communicate with their relatives abroad. Today the internet is more often used in these areas to obtain information.**

> **Colleagues from local Uzbek-language media outlets say that in the country's regions people practically never click on links to websites; they just read the headline and two or three sentences. This is due to the need to save on internet traffic and the high cost of internet access.**

> **We understand that our content is not adapted to the national language, and that we are losing out as a result; the Tajik-speaking audience remains unreached, and it is much bigger. We are now attempting to improve content in the national language.**

Trending Topics: Social Journalism, Scientific Progress, New Technologies

Social problems and societal development are the two topics least frequently covered by online news publications, if they are covered at all. At the same time, these are the most viewed news topics (Tables No. 14 and No. 15).

Women are more interested in ecological issues and problems faced by vulnerable sectors of the population. In Kazakhstan, these topics are viewed by women and men equally often, but in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan these topics are viewed on average ten to 15 per cent more often by women.

Topics related to "women, children and the elderly" and "culture and art" are viewed regularly by six to seven of every ten women, compared to just three to four of every ten men in all countries surveyed. It should be noted that news about the **environment or disabled people are among the three least viewed news topics.**

15% **13%** **14%** **12%**

Technology Environ-ment Social Issues Disabled People

Table No. 15. Absent or Least Common Themes in News Materials, Percentage of Respondents
Source: IWPR CA

Table No. 14. Popularity of News Content Topics, Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Always" and "Often"
Source: IWPR CA

Legend

Icon	Topic	Icon	Topic
	Social Issues, Society		Economy / Finance
	Science / Technology		Sports
	Domestic and Foreign Policies		Culture / Art
	Education		Women, Children, Elderly
	Healthcare		Disabled People
	Environment / Ecology		

Popularity of News Content Topics

Topic	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan
Social Issues, Society	76%	82%
Science / Technology	64%	73%
Domestic and Foreign Policies	65%	63%
Education	66%	66%
Healthcare	59%	54%
Environment / Ecology	55%	65%
Economy / Finance	47%	44%
Sports	47%	51%
Culture / Art	55%	50%
Women, Children, Elderly	51%	45%
Disabled People	33%	35%

Table No. 14. Popularity of News Content Topics,
Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Always" and "Often"
Source: IWPR CA

The younger audience prefers to view news items about sports, education and technology. The reverse trend can be observed with news on domestic and foreign policy, social issues and healthcare: the older the respondents, the higher the percentage who are most interested in news on these topics.
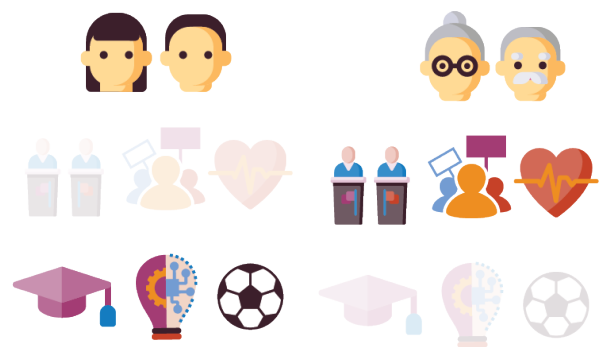
Nevertheless, politics and education are of interest to Central Asians: respondents in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are slightly more interested in politics than those in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Table No. 14. Popularity of News Content Topics, Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Always" and "Often"
Source: IWPR CA

	🇹🇯	🇺🇿
👥	82%	80%
💡	78%	78%
🏛	74%	76%
🎓	65%	69%
❤️	55%	55%
🌱	48%	53%
💰	61%	56%
⚽	51%	51%
🎨	42%	44%
👨‍👩‍👦	44%	40%
♿	37%	30%

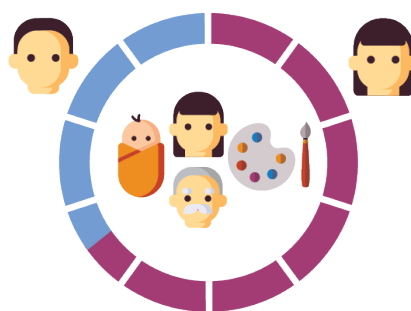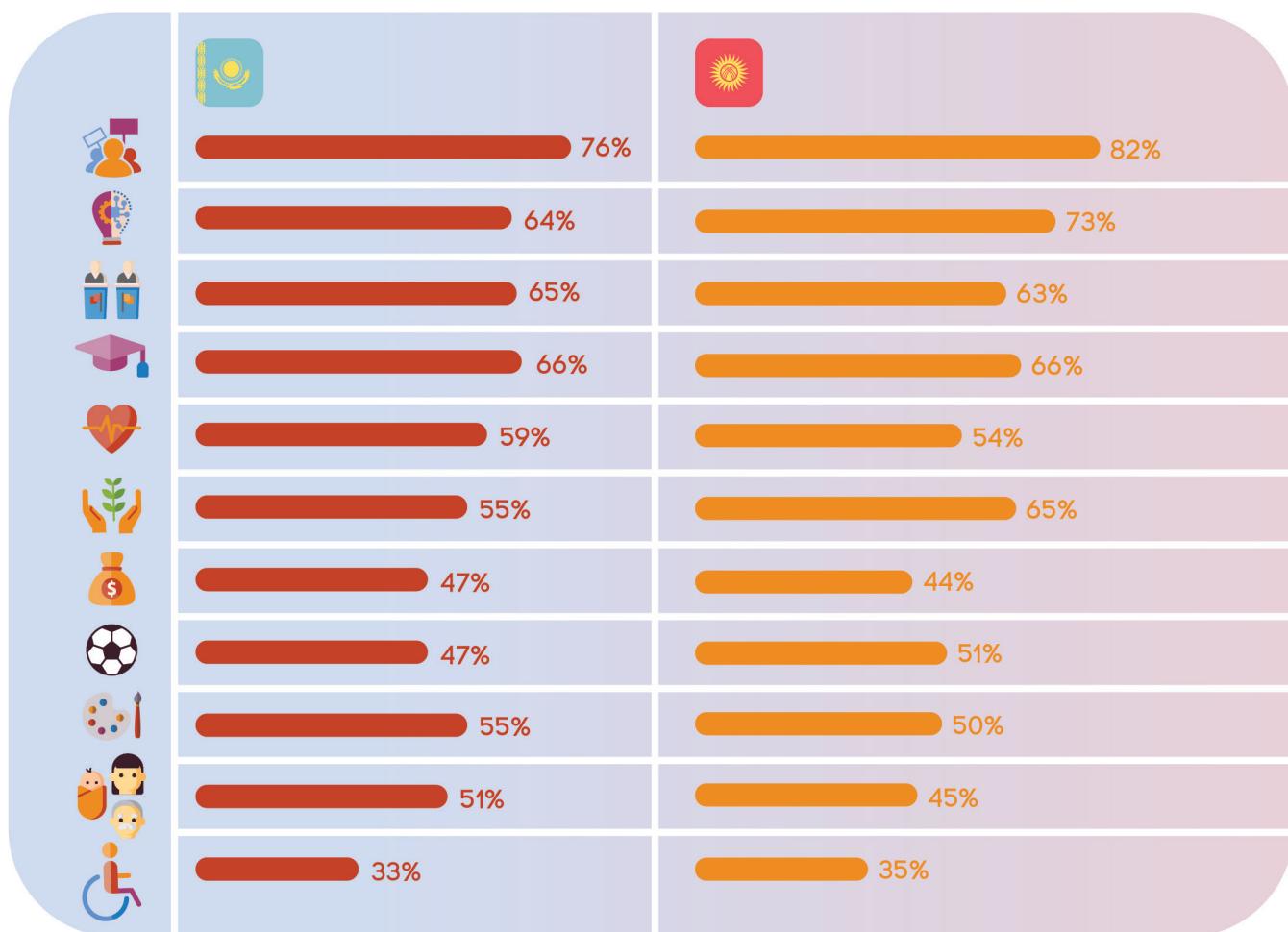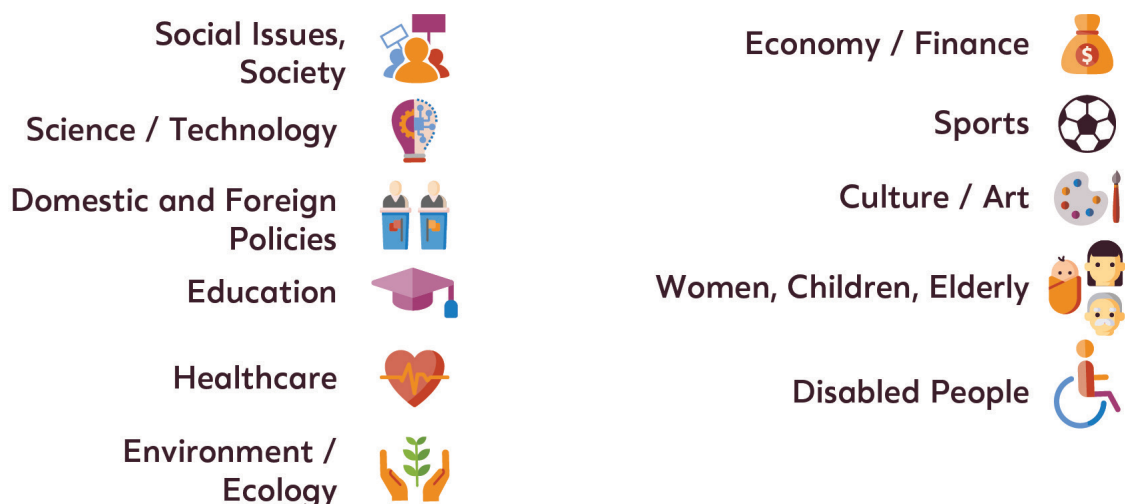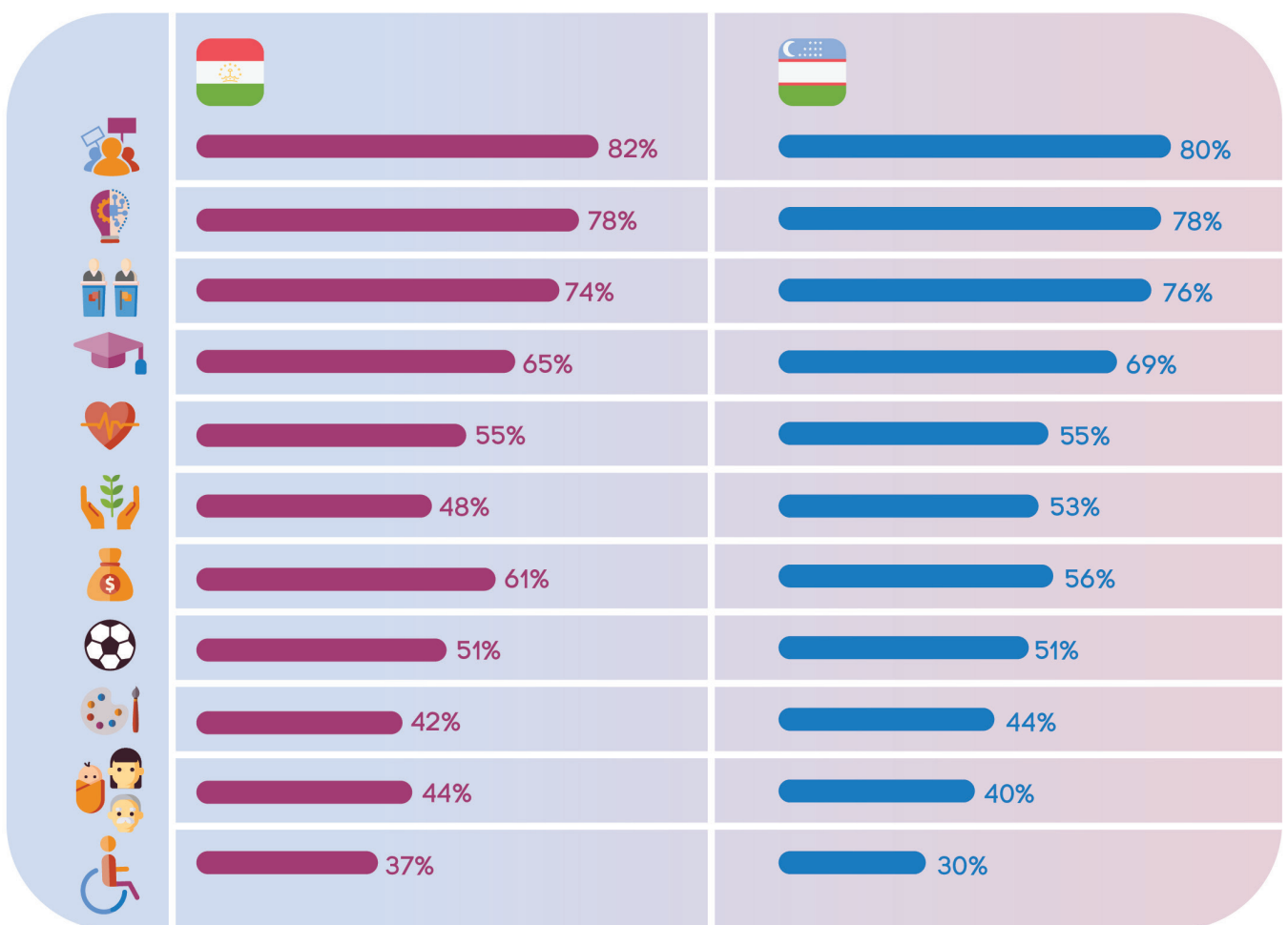*Table No. 14. Popularity of News Content Topics, Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Always" and "Often"*
Source: IWPR CA

Experts from Kazakhstan note that studies conducted by western researchers must be referenced when discussing the popularity of various news topics. According to them, readers are most interested in topics which are directly related to them personally.

In Kyrgyzstan, experts note that the availability of certain topics in news publications depends on the market. *"For example, there is nothing to write about the economy, everything is in the shadows; there is no economic journalism."* In addition, experts consider the Kyrgyz online community to be *"politicised"*.

In contrast, in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan experts assert that the lack of news coverage of serious topics makes readers direct their attention to crime, murders and scandals instead. This explains the demand for social journalism in these countries. Furthermore, experts note the demand for micro-influencers in journalism, given their ability to amplify public positions on such issues and thereby draw the authorities' attention to the ecology and other societal issues.

Our online community is very politicised; religious and geopolitical topics provoke loud discussions.
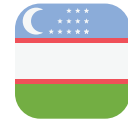
> According to my personal observation, the media audience today is more interested in socioeconomic issues. Environmental issues are also of interest in light of recent events: the culling of stray animals and felling of trees...

> Unfortunately, many topics are not covered now, there are no serious analytical materials covering today's problems. This is the reason why sex, murders and scandals are always widely discussed.

"

Since no similar studies have been conducted in Kazakhstan, there is nothing to refer to. However, if we trust studies conducted in Europe and the USA, then people are primarily interested in the weather, local news, crime, domestic policy, cultural events, international news and so on. It is highly probable that approximately the same situation can be observed in Kazakhstan. Readers are most interested in the most relatable topics. It always has been so and always will be.

"

NEWS

Short News Pieces Are Most Popular; Video Is the Most Demanded Format

We invited respondents to our online survey to specify the frequency with which they consume certain genres of media and which formats they most often use to do so. They presented these in response to nine questions, as well as to indicating which ones they prefer better. This section allows us to assess the differences in demand and supply of news materials. The following can be distinguished in the news content supply:

1

Short news pieces lead among news genres in all countries. It is important to note that this format is what is most often on offer from news outlets. An analysis of forty online media sources in Central Asia confirm this.

2

Video reports, longreads and analytical materials are equally popular in all countries of Central Asia: five to six of every ten people watch and read them, making them both the second most popular genres.

3

Analytical articles and investigative journalism are more popular among older age groups. For example, analytical articles in all countries are on average twice as popular with the oldest age group as compared to the youngest.

4

In all countries, the younger the respondent, the less often he or she reads short news stories. The smallest proportion of readers of this genre are students aged between 16 and 18. Yet even among them, it is the most consumed genre.

Short news pieces   **Video reports**   **Longreads**   **Analytical reports**   **Investigative journalism**   **Online streaming**

Kazakhstan
- Short news pieces: 85%
- Video reports: 62%
- Longreads: 54%
- Analytical reports: 49%
- Investigative journalism: 47%
- Online streaming: 37%

Kyrgyzstan
- Short news pieces: 87%
- Video reports: 58%
- Longreads: 61%
- Analytical reports: 51%
- Investigative journalism: 56%
- Online streaming: 45%

Tajikistan
- Short news pieces: 90%
- Video reports: 59%
- Longreads: 52%
- Analytical reports: 58%
- Investigative journalism: 52%
- Online streaming: 41%

Uzbekistan
- Short news pieces: 92%
- Video reports: 51%
- Longreads: 50%
- Analytical reports: 57%
- Investigative journalism: 54%
- Online streaming: 47%

Table No. 16. Most Consumed News Genres,
Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Always" and "Often"
Source: IWPR CA

The results above also took into account the supply of various genres of news materials; the demand for different news formats has a slightly different dynamic.

1

Respondents in all countries noted that their preferred format for accessing news material is video. Video format thus takes first place in the ranking (Table No. 17).

2

Text, statistics and data journalism come in second and third place according to respondents' preferences. At the same time, the difference in preferences between videos, textual, and data journalism is not particularly significant: on average, seven to eight people out of ten prefer these formats (except in Kazakhstan, where the share of those who prefer these materials ranges from 45 per cent to 57 per cent).

3

The least popular format among respondents were audio podcasts, online tests and quizzes and maps: on average only three out of ten people preferred these (except in Kyrgyzstan, where five out of ten respondents say that they would prefer online tests, quizzes and maps).

4

There is a big gap between the demand and supply of materials in the VR-360 format. Less than ten per cent of respondents consume these materials, but four to five out of ten respondents would prefer doing so if they had the opportunity.

Video

82% 81%
74%
57%

Text

79%
70% 70%
51%

Data and Facts (Statistics)
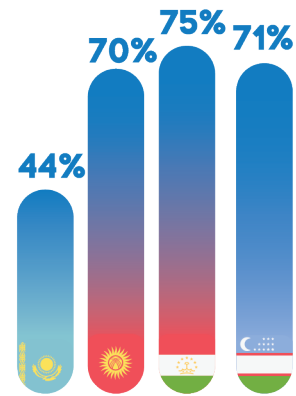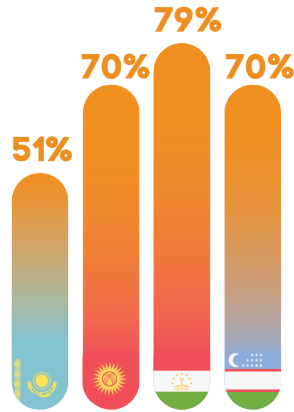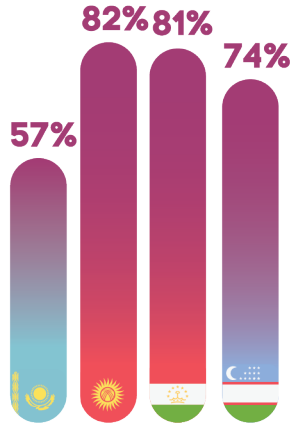
75% 71%
70%
44%

Infographics
- 59%
- 59%
- 54%
- 37%

Captioned Video
- 48%
- 60%
- 55%
- 40%

Livestreams
- 41%
- 53%
- 63%
- 44%
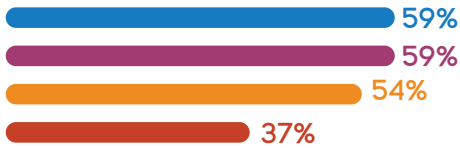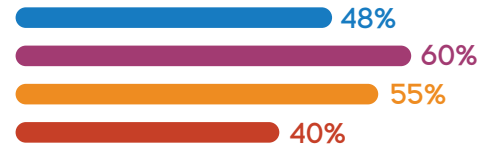
Graphs and Diagrams
- 45%
- 53%
- 50%
- 35%
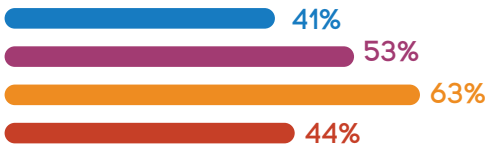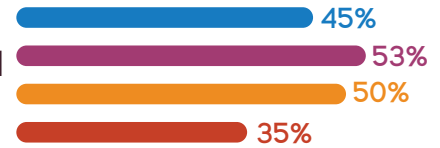
Portrait Video
- 41%
- 53%
- 47%
- 36%
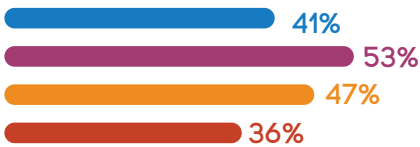
VR-360
- 43%
- 44%
- 49%
- 37%

Tests, Quizzes, Maps
- 23%
- 27%
- 51%
- 34%
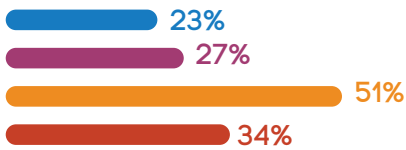
Audio Podcasts
- 23%
- 27%
- 26%
- 28%
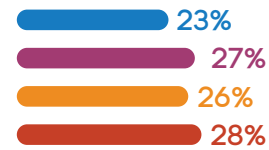
Table No. 17. Preferred Elements in News Materials: Percentage of Respondents, Who Answered Four and Five (on a scale where five means "most preferable" and one means "least preferable.")
Source: IWPR CA

Experts note that news formats are constantly evolving as different genres and formats of news converge. At the same time, despite a general preference for visual components in news, some consumers still mostly prefer text sources.

The task before journalists is changing as well: news media have to fiercely compete for consumers, both with each other and with consumers themselves, given the latter's presence on social networks. Journalists need to constantly strive to be ahead of the curve and push for greater social recognition and fame. Yet they lack the ability to create their own audience on social networks.

Experts emphasise that basic journalistic skills are being lost in the pursuit of new trends. As the professional development of new journalists increasingly demands an understanding of (so-called) new media formats, those who can still write high quality texts are overlooked.

Earlier, there was a clear division between television, radio and print, but new media now use different elements of visualisation and presentation in the same material. Accordingly, we need new journalistic skills, a new way of thinking.

> **The task of the media and journalists is to rank existing information and verify it through their own channels.**

> **Journalists must analyse what is actually happening. On the other hand, they need to create their own audiences, since the journalist him or herself becomes a channel for distributing content and attracting traffic to the site.**

> **There are audiences that prefer short videos, and there are those who like longer videos. In general, there are as many types of audience, as there are formats for content. It is impossible to decide which one is the most attractive. Each media outlet must understand the consumers it works for, and provide information in the formats that are most accessible, understandable and interesting.**

NEWS

RANDOM NEWS AND RESPONSIBLE REPOSTING*

The way consumers select their news sources differs from country to country. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, seven out of ten respondents said that they select news randomly; in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, respondents select news through notifications from the pages of news agencies in social networks.

Six out of ten respondents read links to news stories sent by their friends in personal messages or on the news feeds of social networks.

The older respondents are, the more they prefer to receive regular notifications from news sources, or to intentionally monitor news websites or news pages on social media themselves. A targeted search for news on a specific theme via a search engine is a typical method for those aged 43 or above.
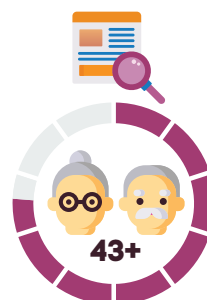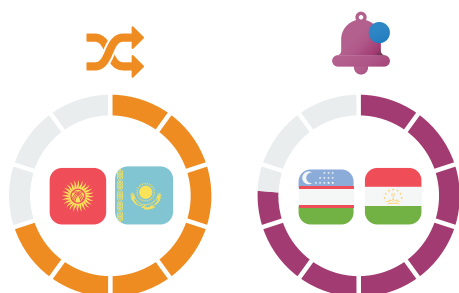
*Table No. 18. Methods of News Selection,
Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Always" and "Often"
Source: IWPR CA*

In general, the data indicate that the majority of respondents use a random or passive method of selecting news, despite the fact that digital platforms allow the audience (with the latest updates to Facebook's algorithms this is even a necessity) to customise notifications and subscriptions, thereby forming their own newsfeed. This is probably why respondents prefer more private platforms where there is no need to make configurations, but rather to simply join groups of shared interest.
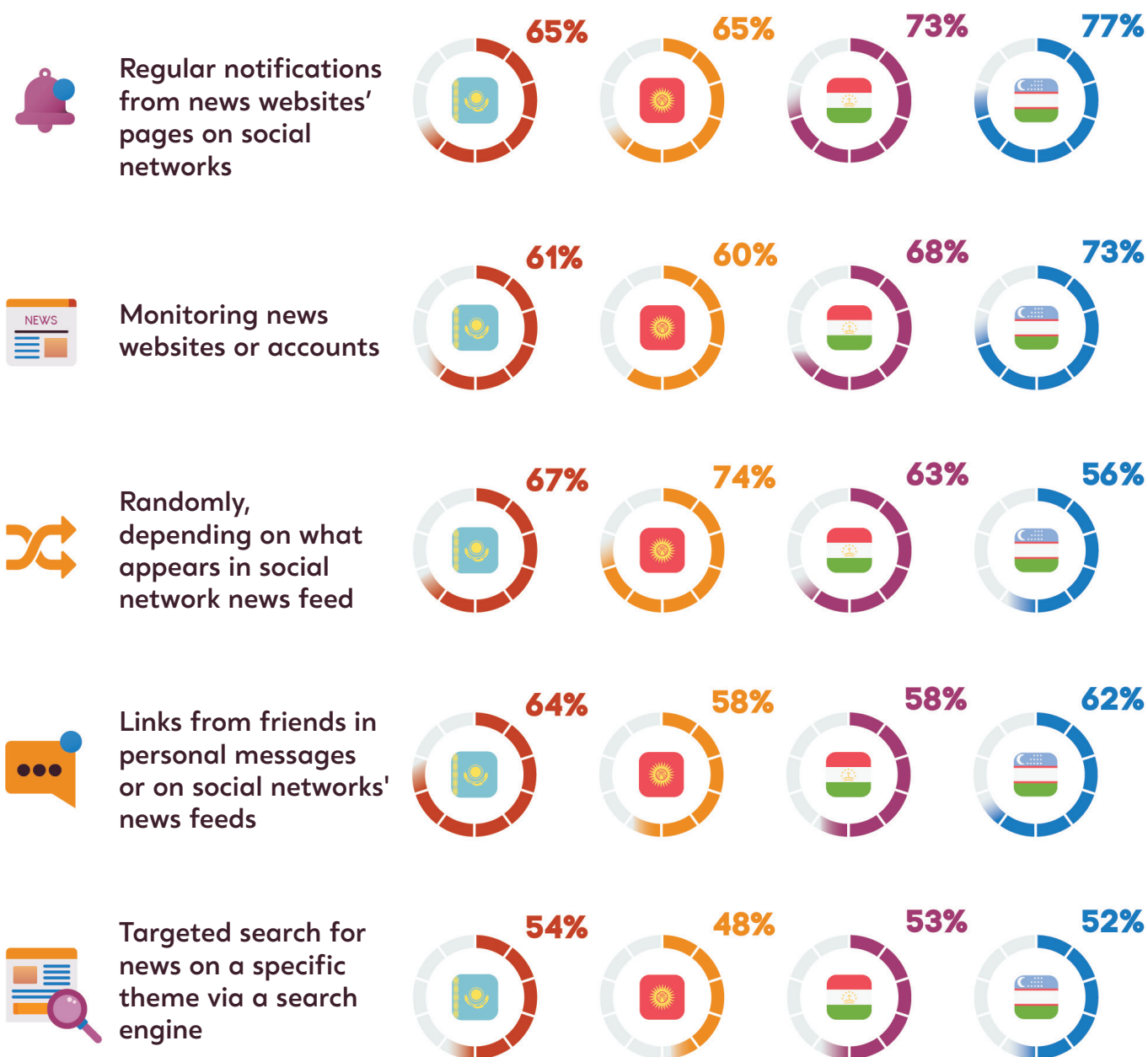
	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan
Regular notifications from news websites' pages on social networks	65%	65%	73%	77%
Monitoring news websites or accounts	61%	60%	68%	73%
Randomly, depending on what appears in social network news feed	67%	74%	63%	56%
Links from friends in personal messages or on social networks' news feeds	64%	58%	58%	62%
Targeted search for news on a specific theme via a search engine	54%	48%	53%	52%

Table No. 18. Methods of News Selection,
Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Always" and "Often"
Source: IWPR CA

At the same time, respondents actively distribute the news themselves. Most often, they share news materials in order to draw public attention to a topic: on average, four out of ten people share news for this reason (Table No. 19). Furthermore, 20 per cent of respondents share news to express their opinions and ten per cent to save the news in their own newsfeed for later consumption.

About seven per cent of respondents share news in order to start a discussion about a particular event or issue. The remaining 20 per cent of respondents (on average) either do not think about why they repost news items or do so for other personal reasons.

47%

To draw public attention

37%

46%

45%

22%

To express own opinion

20%

21%

14%

To save the news in one's own news feed

10%

12%

12%

11%

7%

9%

Do not think about their reasons for reposting

9%
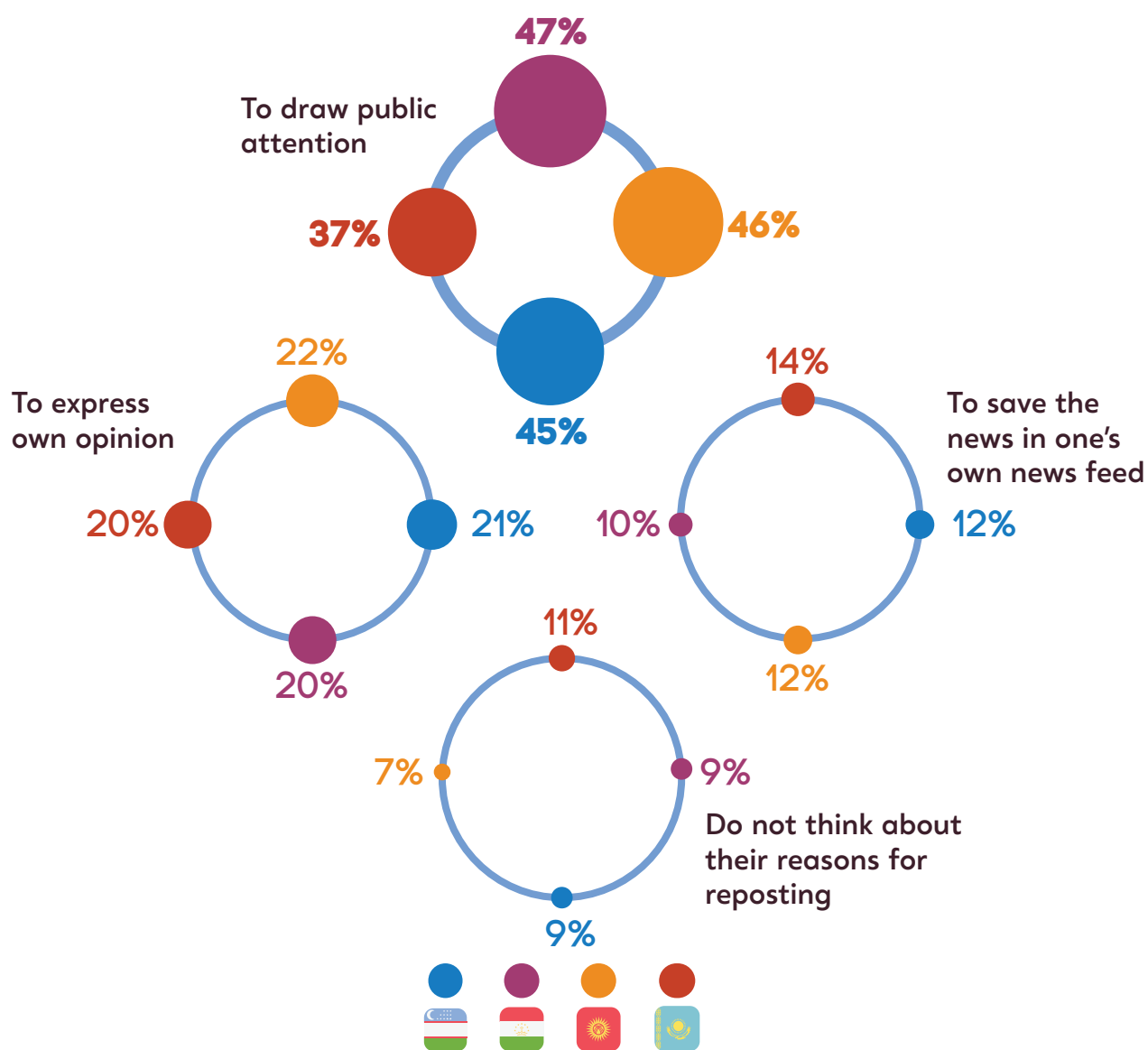
Table No. 19. Reason for Reposting News in Social Networks or Private Messages, Percentage of Respondents
Source: IWPR CA

MEDIA LITERACY, CONFLICT AND GENDER SENSITIVITY

Relevance of Information as an Important Indicator of Reliability

In this section, respondents assessed their levels of trust for various news platforms in cases of conflicting information, and described their methods for verifying information.

In case of conflicting information about the same event, the majority of respondents trust information provided by two types of platforms: official (state) websites and news agencies (one third of respondents). Social networks have less credibility among respondents, ranking third among their trusted sources (Table No. 20).

News agencies' websites and applications

NEWS

30% 29% 31% 32%

Official websites

.gov

29% 32% 31% 30%

Social networks

12% 13% 16% 11%
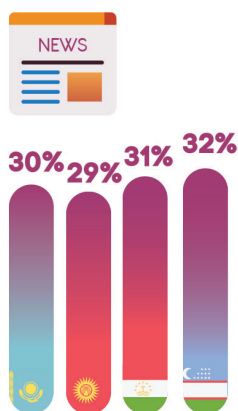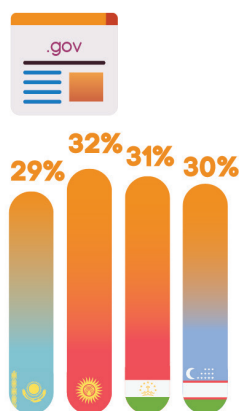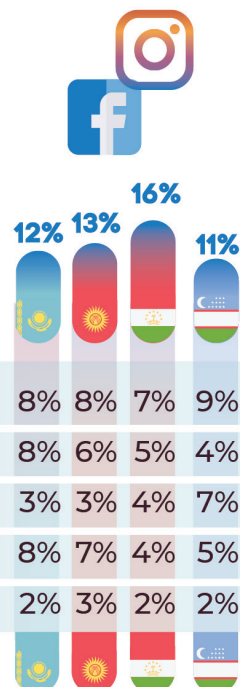
Blogs and personal websites	8%	8%	7%	9%
YouTube channels of news agencies	8%	6%	5%	4%
Instant messaging services	3%	3%	4%	7%
"I do not know"	8%	7%	4%	5%
Other	2%	3%	2%	2%

Table No. 20. Trusted News Sources in Case of Conflicting Information, Percentage of Respondents
Source: IWPR CA

In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, respondents also read the comments under online publications. In the four countries surveyed, almost nobody uses special applications for fact checking (only four per cent). A similarly small proportion of respondents rely on their own expertise for fact checking, or would send a request for verification to organisations which can check the news material in question (Table No. 21).

A significant proportion of respondents are not tolerant towards fake news. When they detect false information, over 40 per cent of respondents consider it important to declare it as such by commenting on social networks or blocking or unsubscribing from the source

Check the relevance of information

24% 21% 21% 24%
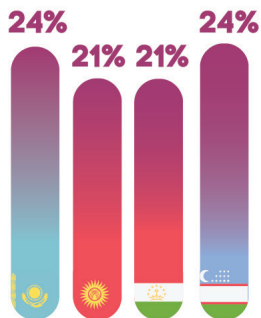
Search for other sources and compare

18% 20% 17% 21%
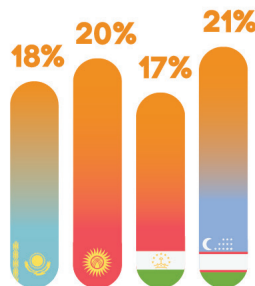
Follow links, if any, to determine the source

19% 17% 18% 16%
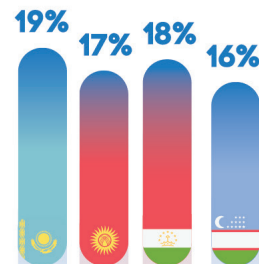
Read the comments, if any, under the publication	14%	18%	18%	17%
Check who published or shared the information	15%	13%	11%	9%
Ask friends or colleagues	4%	4%	6%	6%
Other (own conclusions/ rely on own expertise, send a request to fact checking organisations)	3%	3%	4%	4%
Use special applications for verifying the source and author of information	2%	2%	2%	2%
Use special applications for checking photo and video	2%	2%	2%	1%

Table No. 21. Methods of Verifying News Information, Percentage of Respondents
Source: IWPR CA

"*New media equally affect both the ability to freely disseminate information and the distribution of fake information, misinformation and propaganda,*" experts from Kazakhstan note. Different options for resolving the issue exist, but none of them is yet ideal for the purpose, since there are no criteria for evaluating information based on the reliability and verifiability of its sources.

In public groups* on social networks, where the source of published information is not indicated, users of social networks can play a significant role in disseminating misinformation, by taking information out of context. News agencies then complete this cycle of disinformation by reproducing speeches or opinions without verifying or analysing the information contained within. The third component in this misinformation process, according to experts, are foreign media sources located outside the region. Inside the region, they are Russian media outlets that influence the population of post-Soviet countries. Given these trends, it is worth considering the population's attitude to official sources in more depth, including their high degree of stated trust towards information shared on official websites.

> **Most news media just retransmit somebody's opinion. Many do not check the information and take the speaker on trust, who, in his turn, can cite any statistical data as an example. Even fake data. For their part, journalists often do not check information before broadcasting it.**

> **Do not forget about destructive organisations and their recruiters. Social networks are their main tool. They are mastering the distribution of fake news technologies.**

> **The media literacy level among consumers is very low. They do not know how to distinguish fake news and rumours from verified facts. That is why critical thinking must be developed, especially among the youth.**

> **Firstly, fake news headlines, created only to make people visit a website, cause panic. In social networks, there are frequent cases when information taken out of context is distributed as a verified fact. Both journalists and the public come across such fake news, not to mention other manipulations. Maybe the time has come for our country to raise the issue of media literacy at the national level.**

Low Awareness of Conflict Sensitivity

We asked respondents to answer whether they are familiar with such phenomena as "hate speech" or "hateful rhetoric" in the media.

"Hate speech (synonyms: language of hatred/hateful rhetoric/discriminatory rhetoric) are various forms of expression related to a number of negative discourses. These forms of self-expression disseminate, provoke, stimulate or justify intolerance, incite and encourage xenophobia, and sometimes violence and discrimination against people due to their ethnic, racial, religious, gender, or social group, or their immigrant background. It can be expressed in media through texts, quotes, audio and visual content, pictures, demotivators* or memes*." [26]

The survey revealed that only one third of respondents are familiar with such phenomena as "hate speech" or "hateful rhetoric" in the media. Seven out of ten respondents were not familiar with these concepts or found it difficult to answer the question (Table No. 22).

In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, these responses were closely related to age group. In Tajikistan, the share of respondents aged 43 or older who were familiar with the phenomenon of "hate speech" was 65 per cent and above; in Kyrgyzstan the same figure was at least 50 per cent.

| 28% | 37% | 39% | 27% |
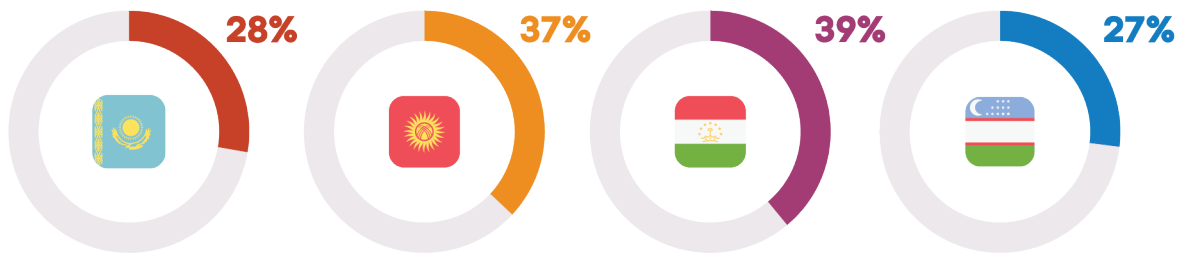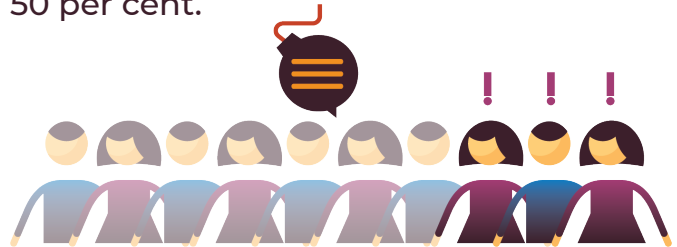
Table No. 22. Awareness of "Hate Speech" or "Hateful Rhetoric", Percentage of Respondents
Source: IWPR CA

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[26] Source: Materials from critical theorist Inga Sikorskaya

Despite the fact that conflict and gender sensitive journalism has been practiced for a long time and has become an integral part of globally recognised journalistic standards, experts believe that these approaches are only beginning to emerge on the Central Asian media landscape. Even though some countries in the region have survived civil wars (Tajikistan in the 1990s) and interethnic conflicts (Kyrgyzstan in 2010), they have yet to develop an avoidance of hate speech; ethnicity is still routinely emphasised in news items or in discussions on social media. Experts from Tajikistan differ on the issue. Some say that journalists have become more cautious in using hateful terms, since they can be prosecuted for insulting the honour and dignity of individuals or groups; others say that trends are moving in the opposite direction. In Kyrgyzstan, media outlets face a dilemma: *"if we need to publicise the position of a particular person who uses hateful language, we choose to broadcast it, even if doing so means broadcasting hate speech."*

In Kazakhstan, a law on hate speech has been interpreted in very different ways;[27] media outlets are afraid to publish about conflict and instead are *"taking proactive preventive steps"* to avoid doing so. This law is most often used to put pressure on critical human rights defenders and journalists. Experts from Uzbekistan note that, in general, there is no research on hate speech in the country; disputes on the issue usually arise on social networks rather than due to anything published by the media.

> **Regarding hate speech, our media describe everything very smoothly. However, when it comes to propaganda, then the real hate speech appears.**

[27] https://cabar.asia/ru/gulmira-birzhanova-smi-kazahstana-opasayutsya-pisat-na-temu-terrorizma-i-ekstremizma/

> In recent years, hate speech has been used much more often, especially on social networks. It becomes personalised and is accompanied by abuse. In addition, many fake accounts have appeared on social networks which leave comments under fake news stories.

> The texts of bloggers and even on some news websites include striking examples of hateful speech. Some conflicts and disputes on social networks are also connected with hate speech. We will have to work for a long time to eliminate this.

> If we followed the ethical standards of journalism, our news would not be interesting, it would become sterile and clerical. Therefore, in cases where somebody's words involve hate speech, we ask ourselves whether to publish the material or not. In the end we decide to publish it.

> The fact is that the number of cases under these articles (256 and 174 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan) has grown significantly in recent years, but there is little sense in it. Political scientists are involved in providing expertise when the assessment of linguists or philologists is required [by the court].

Low Awareness of Gender Sensitivity

A significant share of respondents did not notice any of the proposed types of prejudices and stereotypes regarding women and men in media. According to experts, Central Asian media outlets continue to publish materials with provocative headlines, as well as negative texts or those appealing to traditional family-oriented lifestyles. More often than not, news outlets do not employ gender sensitive language concerning women. Experts conclude that the region's journalists lack basic knowledge on the very concept of gender-sensitive journalism.

According to the results of the survey, the highest share of respondents who do not notice any of the proposed prejudices and stereotypes regarding women and men in the news can be found in Uzbekistan: 35 per cent. In Tajikistan this share is 25 per cent and in Kazakhstan 21%. The lowest share is in Kyrgyzstan, with 18 per cent (Table No. 23).
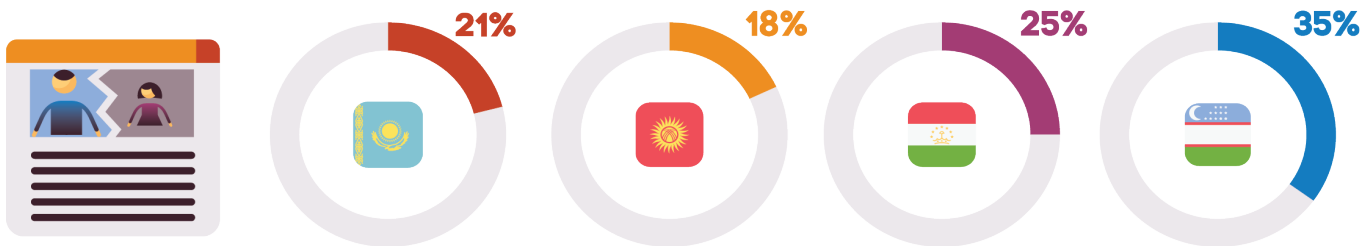
Table No. 23. Respondents Not Noticing Gender-Insensitive Language in News
Source: IWPR CA

There are interesting statistical differences between men and women when it comes to noticing or not noticing these markers. For example, in Kazakhstan the share of women and men who do not notice prejudices and stereotypes regarding gender in news is approximately the same: 22 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women. In Uzbekistan, the share of men who do not notice prejudices and stereotypes regarding gender in news is slightly higher than the share of women: 37 per cent versus 32 per cent. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the share of men who do not notice gender or gender-insensitive language is higher than the share of women, on average, by ten per cent.

Statistics show that women are more likely to notice prejudices and stereotypes regarding gender in the news, and this trend is similar for all countries. Women are more likely than men to notice news materials on women's rights.

The most common prejudices and stereotypes regarding gender that respondents notice are stereotypes concerning the supposed natural purpose of women and men in society, which are noticed by an average of 15 to 20 per cent of respondents. This partially confirms experts' observations. The share of those who noticed all the proposed prejudices and stereotypes regarding gender, on average, does not exceed ten per cent. Moreover, the highest share is in Kyrgyzstan.

	♀	♂
Stereotypes of "natural purpose" in society	19%	18%
Arguments for and against traditional social roles of women and men	13%	13%
Gender-emphasising headlines	7%	9%
News on women's rights	12%	9%
Texts containing emotional speech about women	6%	6%
Texts with unflattering statements about women	7%	6%
Calls for discrimination	6%	6%
All of the above	9%	8%
None of the above	**21%**	**24%**
Other	1%	1%
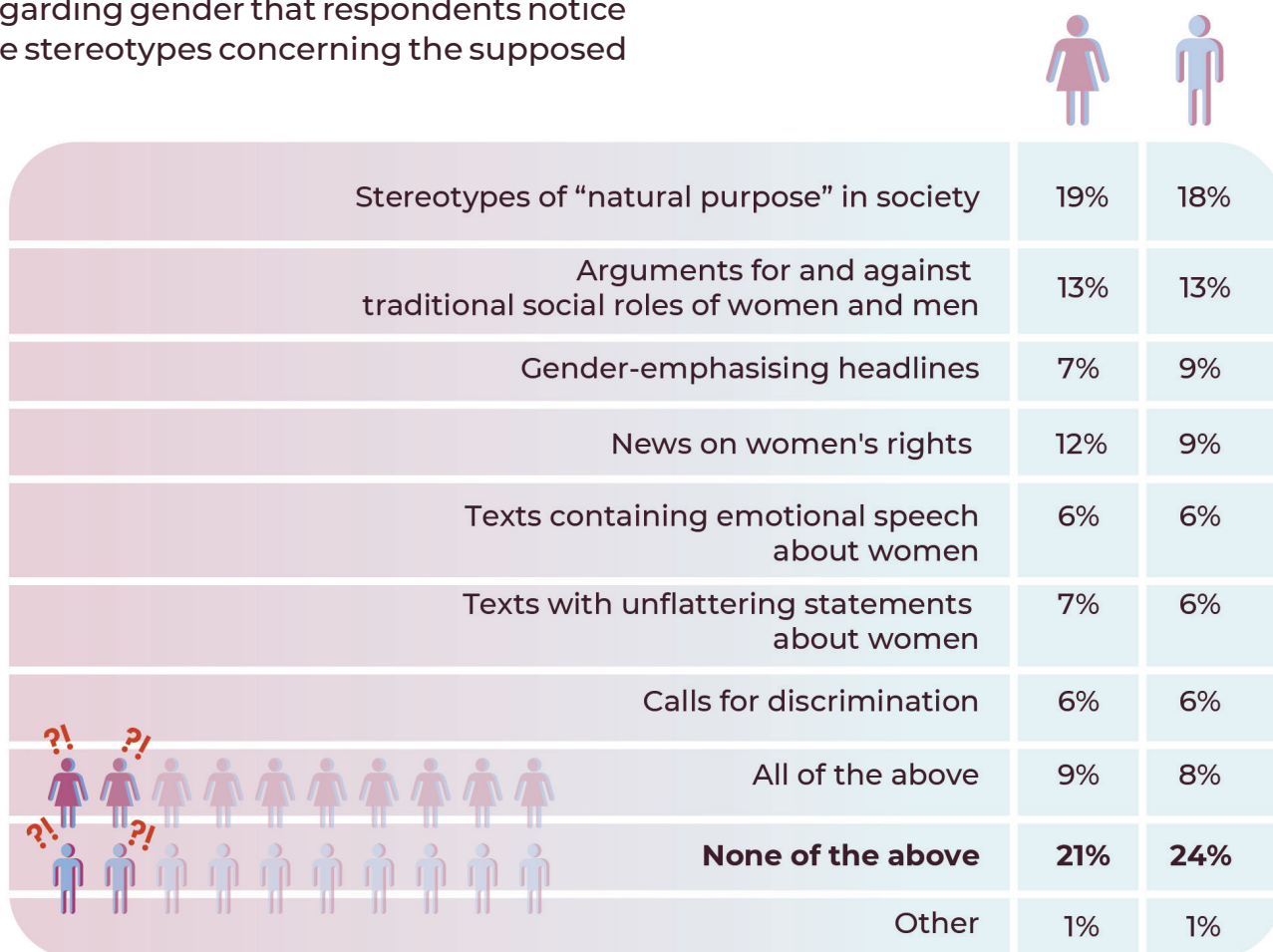
Table No. 23. Respondents Not Noticing Gender-Insensitive Language in News
Source: IWPR CA

"

Most news items are primarily addressed to men. Women are in second place, although the distribution of the audience by gender is equal.

"

"

By my assessment, everything is bad. How social network users express themselves is half the trouble. However, the vocabulary and expressions that are used by public figures, authorities, the expert community and the media (since any media professional or journalist is also a public figure), are the real trouble.

"

NEWS

"

Gender issues are not only of importance to journalism, rather they are the issues of the entire society. Therefore, this topic should be a cornerstone of journalists' training.

"

> **We often come across materials that seem to talk about traditions, but thereby encourage violence against women, or give practical instructions on how a woman should be.**

> **We have not yet realised the meaning of the word 'gender.' There is no understanding of the issue, and the level of coverage on the topic is low. In most cases, women are present in the news only when negative events are covered.**

SOCIAL NETWORK USAGE BY NEWS MEDIA

Specifics of News Distribution Channels Are Not Considered

This section presents an analysis of news media channels on social networks, including TV and radio channels that have websites and social media accounts. The purpose of the analysis is to track the patterns of these media outlets' social network usage in terms of their design, ergonomics, and news formats.

The sampling was carried out in two stages:
1)   An initial screening, based on unique content and with an audience of over 10,000.[28]

2)   Random sampling.

According to results of the initial screening, 150 news media were selected from all four Central Asian countries surveyed for this report, of which ten news agencies from each country were selected using a random sampling method. These included 29 news agencies (eight of which are international) and 11 television channels (five of which are local).

The analysis revealed that in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, media outlets maintain accounts on five or more social networks, including instant messaging services such as Telegram and WhatsApp. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, these media outlets tended to maintain accounts on between two and four social networks.

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[28] An exception in audience reach was made for faraj.tj (Tajikistan), based on the recommendations of local experts.
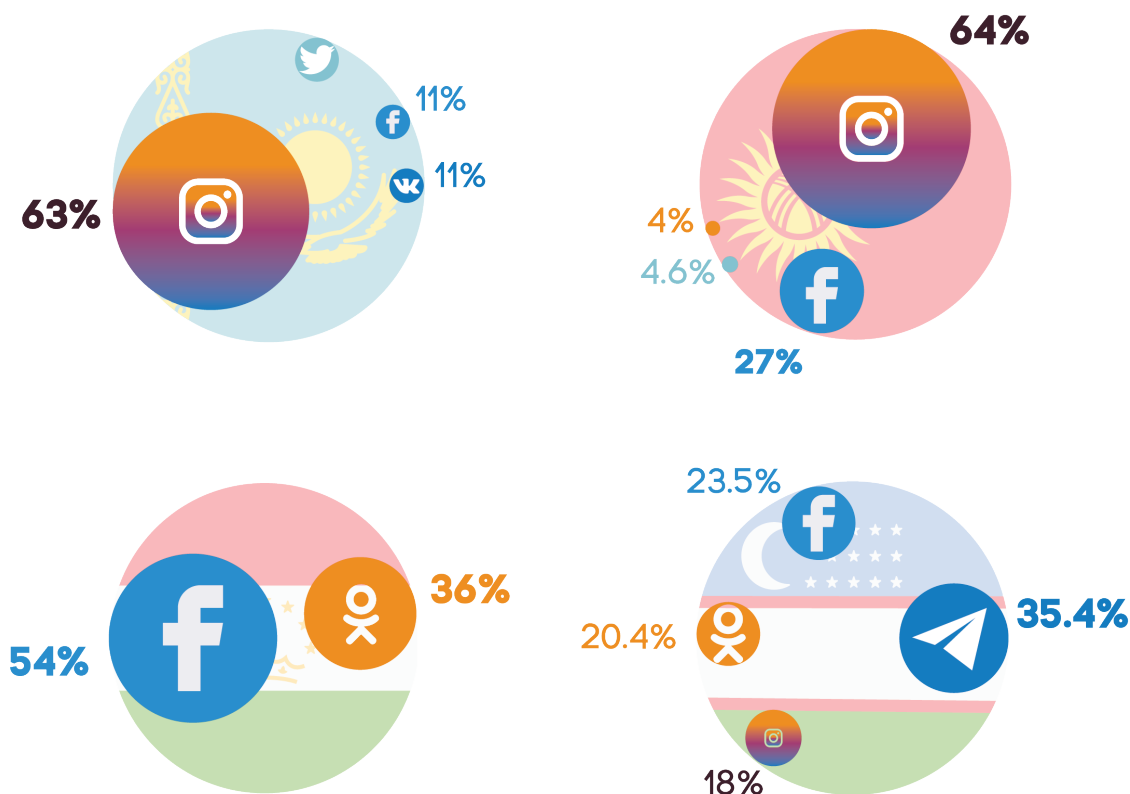
Table No. 25. Share of News Agencies' Subscribers by Platform

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the highest subscription rates to news agencies' pages on social networks are on Instagram. The number of subscribers vary from 40 thousand to several hundred thousand (some even have millions). The popularity of Instagram as a news source in these countries is also confirmed by online survey results.

In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Facebook pages are in the lead, with up to 400 thousand subscribers. When it comes to subscribers to international news agencies, Odnoklassniki is catching up with Facebook in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

In Uzbekistan, Telegram is the leading instant messaging service by number of subscribers: on average, feeds maintained by media agencies have over 900 thousand subscribers. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, one third of the media outlets surveyed maintain accounts on WhatsApp for getting feedback and receiving information from their audiences. These accounts, as a rule, are not intended as official sources of information, do not feature links to the website, and their "status" function is not used for news distribution, although users view WhatsApp statuses as often as they view stories in Instagram.

It should be noted that, according to experts, Instagram in Uzbekistan is rapidly gaining popularity and catching up with Facebook. However, international experts' analysis of Instagram pages suggest that these pages use technologies to get subscribers, and the number of real followers of these channels is significantly lower.

In terms of design and ergonomics, the vast majority of Facebook pages for these media agencies are transparent and provide complete information about their owners: contact details, links to the website for a specific publication or to channels on other platforms. However, their publications are often just reposts with a link to the website and a short text description (which is itself merely a lede or a paragraph which has been copied from the text of the news story).

Pages on Instagram contain links in the profile bio* to the news agency's website or any other accounts it maintains on other platforms. The profiles also save highlights from among their news stories.* In general, news agencies' pages on social networks follow a unified style mirroring that of their news items, but they do also make are spontaneous posts about current events on a less systematic or predictable basis. At the same time, when sharing photographic materials some agencies (usually international news agencies) add captions too. Others do not, which can make it difficult for the reader to understand the meaning of such posts on social networks. TV channels, for their part, often publish announcements and schedules of forthcoming TV programmes.

On other platforms, such as Twitter, Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki and Telegram, news items are shared in the form of links to the websites with a short text (most often the lede). It is worth noting that Uzbek news media publish weather forecasts and exchange rates in their Telegram channels, alongside links to their content on other platforms (such as Instagram, Facebook and their website).

In analysing the social network presence of news agencies, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1

News agencies do not always consider the specifics of the channels they use when publishing news items. Most often, news items on social networks are simply shared as reposts with a link to the website, in order to increase traffic to the website.

2

Short news items are the most common format published and promoted on news agencies' pages; promotion of the longer formats (such as longreads) or unique content is less common.

3

Central Asian countries' news agencies have more subscribers to their Russian language pages on both Facebook and Instagram; for international news agencies, accounts in local languages are more popular.

4

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, WhatsApp is used as a channel to receive user-generated content, and is not considered a platform for distributing news items.

5

In general, the colour schemes and other design formats of the news agencies' pages on social networks correspond to those of their official websites. However, most of the latter are not equipped with counters (for example, for Facebook "likes") nor include links for actions on social networks, such as "tweet", "share", and so on.

SUMMARY
AND FINDINGS

SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

In recent years, the proportion of Central Asians using the internet, social networks, news websites, instant messengers and smartphone applications has grown significantly. Under these conditions, the scale of misinformation, manipulation, fake news and "clickbait" headlines engineered to drive websites' traffic is increasing accordingly. This trend heightens our concerns about the level of media and information literacy of Central Asian journalists and the region's population as a whole. To this end, our agenda is to provide balanced, objective and alternative media content, as well as to support the development of sustainable, high-quality journalism in the region.

Measurements of audiences' demands from online media are a relatively recent innovation, starting from the 2000s. Nevertheless, often "the business segment websites remain the more active and attentive consumers of data on [their] audience." [29]

Our research represents the first attempt to measure online news consumption models in Central Asia. Among the diverse formats of media content, we considered only online news consumption, which allowed us to formulate the following conclusions:

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[29] How the new media changed the journalism. 2012 – 2016 (Kak novye media izmenili zhurnalistiku. 2012—2016). A. Amzin, et al. Ekaterinburg, The Liberal Arts University, 2016

Social networks predominate as news sources. This is in keeping with global trends towards online news consumption via social networks; the statistics for our region are similar to South African and Latin American countries, such as Chile and Brazil[30] where social networks are also the main sources of news.[31]

Despite restrictions on internet across the region, Facebook remains the leading social network for receiving news in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; it is used by between 70 and 80 per cent of respondents to receive the news.

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Instagram is a more popular news source. Nevertheless, among all the social networks Facebook is the most valued for its content in all four countries.

We note a common trend in all four countries surveyed: the younger the respondent, the more they prefer social networks as sources of news; the older the respondent, the more often they read materials on news websites.

Communication and exchange of news items has become more private as instant messaging services improve their usability and algorithms from year to year, gaining more popularity. The most popular messaging services for exchanging and receiving news items are WhatsApp, Viber and Telegram: more than 60 per cent of survey respondents prefer them.

[30] Digital News Report, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, www.digitalnewsreport.org
[31] Other indicators prevail in Western countries. For example, in European countries (Finland, Norway, Sweden) it is typical for consumers to receive news directly from news websites, for East Asian countries (Japan, Taiwan, South Korea) - through aggregators and search engines, while the US population consumes news almost equally from all platforms

The demand for news in local languages is increasing. On average, over half of the respondents in all four countries indicated they read news mainly in Russian; local languages are less popular. According to experts, this is due to the fact that most media are concentrated in the countries' capitals; most consumers of online news are urban residents. Most social networks offer content in Russian. However, it is worth bearing in mind that consumption of news materials through social networks and instant messaging services is growing in rural areas, but local media outlets are only adapting slowly to the changing trends of the new media environment. This is due in a large part to technical difficulties with internet access.

Restrictions to internet access prevent news media from working with new resources (such as interactive tests, infographics and data visualisation). At the same time, the popularity of various social networks and instant messengers is increasing.

The majority of respondents use a random or passive method to select news, despite the fact that digital platforms allow the audience to customise notifications and subscription settings (with the latest updates to Facebook's algorithms, doing so has even become necessity) thereby forming one's own newsfeed. This is the probable reason why the respondents choose more private platforms where there is no need to configure their news feeds; they simply join shared interest groups.

Central Asian audiences want to receive more news on new technologies and the environment. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the supply of news on these topics cannot match the rising demand: respondents indicate a lack of news about social issues.

Short news pieces are the most popular type of news item in online media. Longreads, analytical material and investigative journalism are also gaining in popularity, but experts note that journalists need more knowledge in order to deliver quality content in these genres.

News agencies do not always consider the specifics of the channels they use when sharing news materials on them. News shared on social networks are frequently published as reposts with a link to the website.

Educational institutions in Central Asian countries are characterised by a conservative approach to and a traditional understanding of the function of journalism. Experts note that their curricula do not meet contemporary requirements, while students of journalism faculties need to learn critical analysis and self-development skills in order to understand the specifics of news audiences today.

Given the prevalence of social networks, a journalist today has to strive for greater social recognition and fame in order to create his or her own audience in social networks. The column format is a good mechanism for cultivating micro-influencers in journalism, allowing for the production of reasonably regular news pieces, albeit

in accordance with journalistic standards. The same principles can then influence behaviour on social networks and instant messaging services.

Official (state) websites and news agencies are more trusted in the region. In cases of conflicting information about the same event, the majority of respondents trust the veracity of information from these sources. Respondents most frequently draw their own conclusions about the veracity of new information by checking its relevance or by searching for other sources and comparing the information. At the same time, almost nobody (95 per cent of all respondents) in the four countries surveyed uses special applications for fact checking.

More often than not, those involved in spreading disinformation are users of social networks themselves: they disseminate information taken out of context. On one hand, this indicates a low level of media literacy on the part of news consumers. On the other hand, these negative dynamics are bolstered by the fact that news agencies transmit speeches or opinions without checking and analysing the information contained therein, simply taking the speaker's words at face value.

This research has also revealed a low awareness of conflict and gender sensitivity among the population. Only one third of respondents are familiar with such phenomena as "hate speech" or "hateful rhetoric" in media. A significant proportion of respondents does not notice the prevalence of any prejudices and stereotypes regarding women and men, i.e. prejudices and stereotypes regarding women in the news.

The highest share of such respondents is in Uzbekistan (35 per cent), followed by Tajikistan (25 per cent), Kazakhstan (21 per cent), and finally Kyrgyzstan (18 per cent). On average, women are more likely to notice prejudices and stereotypes regarding women and men in the news, a trend common to all countries surveyed. Furthermore, women notice news materials about women's rights more often than men.

According to experts, journalists lack sufficient knowledge about conflict-sensitive and gender-sensitive journalism. Media outlets in Central Asia continue to publish materials with provocative headlines, as well as negative texts appealing to traditionally minded or conservative family values.

It is also important to note that there are notable gender gaps in internet usage statistics in the four Central Asian countries (which is partly reflected in the respondents' distribution in our survey). International research demonstrates that worldwide, according to various estimates, women are between 25 per cent to 50 per cent less likely to have access to the internet than men. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan do not yet participate in international research projects on internet access, but studies on Facebook's targeted advertising audience indirectly demonstrate a gender gap in internet access in these countries, and not one to women's advantage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that social networks and instant messengers be considered as a separate platform for content distribution in journalistic and media studies curricula. Multimedia journalism programmes must address the specifics of each platform and the corresponding characteristics of the media consumption.

The relevant departments, ministries and university administrations must create conditions for the advanced training of the academic staff of journalism faculties, ensuring that they are up to speed about new media, new genres and formats for delivering news content, as well as media literacy, fact checking tools and the blogosphere. They must also ensure that training programmes feature analysis and interpretation of current events.

Separate modules must be incorporated into the curriculum of journalism faculties dedicated to strengthening and updating existing programmes' awareness of conflict-sensitive and gender-sensitive journalism. These curricula must focus on studies of search optimisation for websites, analytical tools for assessing websites' audiences, and social media and instant messaging services' algorithms. These must be incorporated into a greater drive to teach new technologies for analysing digital media content.

In order to improve journalists' socialisation skills, future journalists must be taught the importance of cultivating their online status as micro-influencers with the knowledge and ability to apply journalistic standards to engaging with the news on social media networks.

TO NEWS MEDIA OUTLETS

To develop social journalism in the region, local and regional content, and to increase the quality of content in local languages.

To increase the capacity of news agencies to devise a media production strategy, including a strategy for maintaining pages on social networks (this should include the preparation of a content plan*, the conduct of objection handling*, and the ability to use targeted promotion*).

To consider popular instant messaging services for each country as separate platforms for content distribution and adapt the format of news items for transmission across these platforms accordingly.

To strengthen the image of news agencies in social media. Pay more attention to the design of pages and accounts on social networks, create unique content on those platforms where there is the highest audience involvement. Observe trends, explore platforms' features and adapt to the requirements of each.

Given the importance of personal brands, to follow the example of media personalities and form the personal brands of journalists as authors, promoting them and helping them to become opinion-makers*. At the same time, focus on cultivating adherence to high ethical values and standards as part of journalists' responsibilities to their audience.

To change approaches to journalism: from the simple presentation of news to telling significant stories, explaining events and helping the audience to understand these processes. To improve the extraction and analysis of data, including its visualisation.

TO MEDIA COMMUNITY AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

To facilitate further studies of the news media audience in the region, in order to identify the features of news consumption over a longer time period. Identifying such trends may allow news outlets to adjust their content to the requirements of the audience accordingly.

To conduct long-term content analysis of media publications (including pages on social networks) to monitor the materials content on conflict and gender sensitivity, misinformation, quality of headlines and ledes, tone and perspective of news materials about Central Asia. Such studies can serve as evidence and a training tool not just only for journalism departments, but also for journalists themselves, allowing them to track changes and trends.

To conduct a content analysis of news materials in Central Asia, thereby identifying the level of regional news coverage in the wider media landscape.

To pay attention to the gender gap in rates of internet access and consumption of news materials, to support girls and women with special programmes, especially in rural areas of Central Asian countries, in order to facilitate their greater social inclusion and combat the digital gender divide.

To create mentoring programmes for local news outlets and promote capacity building for local journalists.

To cooperate with Google, Facebook and other research agencies in order to obtain quantitative analytics from them.

To create and distribute a glossary/textbook/guide on gender and conflict sensitive topics in order to improve the audience's potential ability to recognise negative content.

GLOSSARY

GLOSSARY

Content Plan – a list of possible themes for a certain period: a week or a month. The editorial plan includes only texts, and the content plan (usually for social networks) includes different types of publications, divided into days. Importantly, these plans must be aimed at responding to audiences' needs.

Cross-Platform Content, unlike content on a single platform, this content is "distributed in various formats", including the internet, mobile applications, social networks, forums, chats, etc. (Singer, J. & Quandt, T. 2009).

Conflict Sensitive Journalism - empowers reporters to report conflicts professionally without feeding the flames of conflict. Conflict sensitive journalism means that we report in depth, cover all sides and allow for an opportunity for those involved to ventilate all issues related to the conflict (Ross Howard, Conflict-sensitive journalism. International Media Support (IMS) and IMPACS).

Demotivators or Demotivational Poster – a variety of posters with captions formally aimed at creating an atmosphere of doom and meaninglessness. They usually consist of an online image and an accompanying comment.

Gender Awareness (Gender-sensitive) - Gender-sensitive: Policies and programmes that take into account the particularities pertaining to the lives of both women and men, while aiming to eliminate inequalities and promote gender equality, including an equal distribution of resources, therefore addressing and taking into account the gender dimension (https://eige.europa.eu/).

Fake News – information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts. Much of the discourse on 'fake news' conflates three notions: misinformation, disinformation and mal-information. But it's important to distinguish messages that are true from those that are false, and messages that are created, produced or distributed by "agents" who intend to do harm from those that are not. **Disinformation** - information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country. **Misinformation** - information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm. **Malinformation** - information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country.

Memes – someone or something that has become famous on the Internet and has become an object of discussion with a "cult" status. It can be any phrase, idea, symbol, image or sound that is transmitted from person to person based on imitation.

Micro-influencer – a so-called niche blogger; a person who maintains his or her blog on any of the social networks with at least 1,000 subscribers. These are considered influential people and opinion leaders, to whom their audience listens.

Micro-influencers in Journalism – students of journalism departments, journalists or bloggers who use their personally branded accounts as platforms for distributing news content of their own production, as well as reposts with comments, analysis, etc.

Multiscreen – when one person uses several devices or several screens for receiving information at once. For example, after watching TV, this news consumer may use Google's search function on their computer, reads information on their tablet, comment on social networks on their smartphone, or watch videos through video services on the screen of a smart watch.

News Consumption – an active search for news on the Internet, television or in print. New Media – communication tools that are digital, interactive, hypertextual, virtual, online and simulated. New media are characterised by their exclusively digital nature and low physical costs of production and distribution. New media formats include mobile applications, social networks, videos, blogs, e-books, email and podcasts.

New Media Journalism emerged in the late 20th century and has continued to evolve in the early 21st century. It is a form of journalism based on the convergence of digital, or computer-based, technologies and telecommunications, especially but not always limited to the Internet. New media technologies are reshaping journalism in four key ways. Firstly, new media are transforming how journalists conduct their work. Secondly, new media are restructuring journalistic organisations and institutions. Thirdly, new media are giving rise to new forms of media content. Fourthly, new media are reinventing the relationships between and among journalists, journalistic organisations and their many publics, especially the following five: audiences, sources, regulators, financers and competitors.[32]

[32] Pavlic J. V. New Media Journalism // 21st Century Communication. A Reference Handbook. Volume 1 & 2. (Ed. By William F. Eadie. Los Angeles, 2009. 970 p. P. 643-651.)

Objection Handling – responses and official reactions to negative comments. However, it is important to remember that this is not simply a method of self-defence but also presents an opportunity to build dialogue. It allows one to gain a greater insight into how users react to certain words and materials, and if there are disagreements about the latter, to overcome them.

Opinion-maker – an opinion leader. A person who is distinguished by a high social status and a greater access to information. The opinion of "influencers" are in many cases a reliable indicator of what the majority might think about a given issue.

Profile Bio – the heading of a profile (page, account), or its description on social networks. This is the first information users see when they visit the profile page. Filling out a profile bio is important in attracting the interest of the target audience or explaining the page's main activities.

Proxy Server (Anonymiser) and VPN – an intermediary between the user and an internet resource. By using a VPN, one can easily access websites that are blocked in a particular country, at work or by an internet service provider. Anonymisers are also used to ensure privacy.

Public Groups – pages on social networks. Repost – a quick way to share an article or another media item on a social network. This function allows for the instant reproduction of information and its publication on private page or its transmission to friends and acquaintances. By reposting, a user shares information in its original form and leaves a link to the source.

Saved Stories (Highlights) – short stories that can be permanently pinned in the profile header under the main information so that they do not rapidly disappear in a news feed which changes by the day. Such saved stories can answer users' most frequently asked questions about or possible objections to a news agency, demonstrating the selection of unique materials on offer or displaying important technical information to users.

Targeted Promotion – a form of online advertising, allowing for greater promotion of services. It can be configured through a Facebook advertising account.

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