

# Scientific Herald of Uzhhorod University

Series "Physics"

Journal homepage: <https://physics.uz.ua/en>

Issue 55, 586–593

Received: 13.11.2023. Revised: 05.02.2024. Accepted: 26.02.2024



DOI: 10.54919/physics/55.2024.58bt6

## Mass media and social networks in the modern politics of Kazakhstan

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### Abstract

**Relevance.** Kazakhstan has recently joined the group of countries affected by the concept of "networked social movements". Since 2013, many blogs have started to appear on YouTube and Facebook. Using social networks blogs, political activists have begun to voice their discontent and question the legitimacy of the political regime that has emerged since independence in 1990. While social movements and controversial politics are integral to political systems, autocratic regimes are inherently opposed to controversial collective action because they contribute to the destruction of such regimes.

**Purpose.** The goal of such regimes is to retain power as long as possible. The Internet provides new channels for citizens' voices, minority perspectives and political mobilisation.

**Methodology.** Blogs, online forums, Facebook, and Twitter are already providing citizens with a new form of the public sphere and an alternative source of news and information, which is seen as a new platform for exchanging news. Data from blogs and print media were taken, which reported on the worst civil conflict in the post-Soviet history of Kazakhstan. Consequently, many information sources supported the government's claims.

**Results.** This example demonstrates both the importance of an active online community in Kazakhstan and the government's understanding of the importance of online interaction with its citizens. What can be learned from the Zhanaozen case about the role of social networks on the Internet in political transformation in Kazakhstan? What role does the government of Kazakhstan play in combating political dissent through cyberspace?

### Suggested Citation:

Kaliyev I, Altybassarova M, Akishev A, Begimtayev A, Polomarchuk B. Mass media and social networks in the modern politics of Kazakhstan. *Sci Herald Uzhhorod Univ Ser Phys.* 2024;(55):586-593. DOI: 10.54919/physics/55.2024.58bt6

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**Conclusions.** This study will contribute to a better understanding of current political processes in Kazakhstan and demonstrate the link between the increased use of social networks on the Internet and political activism in Kazakhstan.

**Keywords:** mass media; civic participation; Facebook; Twitter; public policy.

## **Introduction**

Debate about how the Internet affects the political arena has been rich since the beginning. In the 1990s, scientists began study in this area, interested in the interactive capabilities of the Internet [1-5]. The Internet was hailed as an opportunity to implement the ideal of direct democracy [6-9]. It has also been argued that if the Internet fails to achieve this goal, its impact on politics will be minimal. This scenario did not take into account the established institutional procedures of representative democracy, which were mistakenly considered outdated. However, given the initial limited penetration of digital technologies into political institutions, government processes, and limited access to the Internet in different geographic regions, in different social and cultural circles, the initial debate about the impact of the Internet on politics was more theoretical than empirical. With the advent of the public use of the Internet, the framework of studies in this area has been further developed. The debate about how the Internet influences politics has grown dramatically and, as scientists have observed, its influence is no longer declared as destiny, but is now being established through observation [10-15].

Today, there is more empirical evidence on the impact of the Internet use on politics, thereby making the debate more meaningful. The studies have examined the relationship between the Internet and politics from a wide range of analytical perspectives. Scientists emphasised that the Internet can foster civic engagement by creating links between interest groups, allowing them to develop knowledge on specific policy issues for citizens and increase their ability to compare multiple perspectives. Others were interested in the Internet's potential for self-expression and in helping to spread personal and local demands [16-18]. The Internet has also been perceived as an opportunity to create new forms of political participation, as a tool to improve communication between citizens and political institutions, and finally as a new space for policy debate. All of these new conditions are considered beneficial for strengthening democracy through increased political participation. In short, the debate can be summed up along two opposing lines of argument: some scholars argue that the Internet is creating a new political space that is crucial for strengthening democracy, while other scholars point out that the Internet is a space for practical policy implementation. Many intermediate conclusions were drawn between both opposing arguments. The famous conflict between "cyber-optimists" and "cyber-pessimists" has evolved into a more balanced optimism. The former have found that information and communication technologies (ICT) are not a panacea for democracy, and the latter cannot so easily deny the usefulness of digital technology to facilitate political practice. Today it can be concluded that the use of digital technologies for the practice of politics did not bring about revolutionary changes in democracy, as predicted by cyber-optimists. There was no radical reorganisation of

political institutions or massive political involvement of citizens caused by the Internet [19-21].

The Internet has evolved since the beginning, and its influence on politics has changed with the emergence of many new digital platforms. From the first bulletin board system (BBS) to our continued ability to stay connected via social media platforms via mobile phones, the Internet today offers many policy-influencing tools. This evolution then produces various effects for which researchers are quick to carry out new analyses. The advent of social networks has further revolutionised the ability of digital platforms to connect people, ensuring their ongoing interaction and collaboration, bringing their voices to the wider public. It is generally accepted that social media play a key role in the dissemination of information and statements from political groups. It is an important communication channel through which political communities or individual citizens, as ordinary members of the public, can provide information about their activities, publish their positions on specific topics, exchange information from several sources, and also report on the problems surrounding them for a certain time.

## **Materials and Methods**

The theoretical and methodological background of the paper is determined by its subject matter. The theoretical and methodological basis of this study was the fundamental provisions of scientists concerning the generalisation of the substantive characteristics of the influence of the media outlets and social networks on modern political processes taking place within the Republic of Kazakhstan. In particular, a comparative historical method was used to analyse the development and functioning of social networks. This method allowed considering the stages of the development of social networks. In addition, the study used the scientific methods of inquiry—systematic analysis, comparative graphic methods, normative approach, typology, and classification. Content analysis was used to study the basic properties of social networks and their operation. When analysing the conceptual vocabulary, a multidisciplinary approach was applied, based on the use of theoretical achievements of sociology, philosophy, political science and communications research. Analysis has become one of the main approaches in this study. Analysis is a method based on the breakdown of an object into its component parts. The analysis examined the work on social networks and political communication. The ways of interaction of politicians and activists with popular publications and bloggers, who are opinion leaders for the population of the Republic of Kazakhstan, were studied.

The next step was synthesis. Synthesis is a method of research aimed at combining separate parts of the system under consideration, its elements into a single system. With the help of synthesis, this study has identified the main methods that influence the internal political processes taking place in Kazakhstan. The main spheres of influence of the media and social networks on politicians were

deduced. In addition, a descriptive method was used in the study – this is a system of techniques used to characterise the phenomena of a language at the current stage of its development. This is a method of synchronous analysis. The descriptive method is essential for the practice of language learning. It has been used to refer to terminology related to the specifics of media and social networks. Benchmarking is a powerful and versatile tool that expands the ability to understand and describe political processes and changes in any country in accordance with the existing reality, concepts and goals facing any political system. With the help of a comparative analysis, the features of the influence on the political process within the Republic of various types of mentions in the media outlets and social networks were determined. A comparison is made of a portrait of a politician and his reputation in online newspaper and magazine publications and among bloggers and opinion leaders. Furthermore, the systems approach was applied. This allows analysing the data obtained from the theoretical and practical database and to identify the features of the reflection of political realities in online publications, social networks and Internet communities that are interested in this topic.

## Results and Discussion

The concept of politics includes a broader understanding of political participation that goes beyond formal political processes and interactions between government institutions and citizens. The wealth of the political system is supported by various forms of political practice. They can be adopted by different politicians depending on their goals, conditions and the use of different instruments. As a result, social networks fit into politics differently depending on the structure in which it is used. This means that due to the existence of various forms of political practice, it is possible to provide many answers to questions about the relationship between social media and politics. Here, in order to establish order among opposing sides, when studying how social networks influence politics, facilitating the processes of information exchange, it is necessary to clarify what kind of political practice is being discussed. It should be clarified, for example, how candidates and political parties use social networks in their daily political activities, or how they use it in their political campaigns. How government agencies use social media to engage citizens in their activities? Can social media create new spaces for discussion and raise public awareness on political issues? Can social media play a role in mobilising and coordinating social movements, and ultimately challenging autocratic regimes, such as in the Arab Spring? By addressing these questions, it is possible to systematise the multiple influences of social media on politics.

For example, social media facilitate campaigning of political parties and candidates, using social media to develop communication strategies to optimise visibility and gain voter support from citizens. Social media is also used to support protests by social movements, where social media is used to decentralise the dissemination of alternative information, create hostile attitudes and coordinate protests. Social media fosters all of these political practices inherent in a healthy democracy [22; 23]. Next, the study considers some empirical evidence to help understand how social media supports political

practice. The primary focus is on how political parties use social media to engage people in "conventional" forms of political participation, such as voting. Secondly, the study explores how social movements are shaping the use of the Internet to practice what experts define as non-conventional forms of politics: those practices and tactics used by the non-institutional side of politics outside the realm of conventional ones. Participation in political life (i.e. voting, membership in a political party, lobbying) does not amount to serious political crimes such as terrorism".

One of the ways to solve the issue of creating an information space in Kazakhstan is the acquisition of Kazakh language by 60 to 95% of the country's inhabitants, according to the State Programme for the Functioning and Development of Languages for 2011-2020. Under this programme, the share of Kazakhs who speak Russian will be at least 90%, the share of Kazakhs who speak English will be about 20% [4]. Nowadays, the percentage of newspapers and magazines published in the Kazakh language began to prevail in the information preferences of young people, as well as the percentage of television and radio broadcasts in the Kazakh and Russian languages. Over the past five to ten years, the share of Kazakh-language content on the Internet has increased dramatically. Many newspaper publications in the Kazakh language have switched from paper to online. This allows combining the presentation of materials with photos, videos, and text; working on an attractive design, using infographics, data journalism, longreads. Experts began to note that advertising has already begun to dominate not just on television, but on the Internet. Kazakh language content was previously descriptive and peaceful, but now analytical and assertive. New media for many young Kazakhs is not only a way of communication, but also of obtaining information about the history of the country, historical figures that determined the country's independent status a hundred years ago, about national culture, traditions, political and economic life [24; 25]. The names of many statesmen and public figures, at one time forgotten due to the repressions of the 1930s, began to be rediscovered.

Social networks have acquired opinion leaders who, along with conventional media like newspapers, television and radio, have become a kind of informal media, transmitting information in both Kazakh and Russian languages. The preferences of Kazakhstanis (about 1500 people were interviewed) to use information from the Internet are also confirmed by the data of the Media Preferences study [6; 26]. Consequently, new media, along with conventional media, play a significant role in identifying citizens of Kazakhstan as representatives of one country. Nowadays it has become customary for Russian or Korean announcers to conduct news in the Kazakh language, the emergence of youth musical groups of European appearance, performing modern Kazakh songs. Famous athletes who received gold and silver at the Olympics position themselves as Kazakhstanis.

In the absence of political pluralism and civil society, social networks have become a focal point for the protection of the general public and alternative political views. The virtual space of the Internet has provided new opportunities for the expression of social and political grievances [27; 28]. The online political arena takes the

form of personal and public blogs on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. The significant benefit was the increased coverage of the Internet connection. According to official data from the Ministry of Information and Communications, the share of Internet users was about 14 million people (77%) in 2017 and 17.148 million in 2019 [10]. The seven best YouTube blogs of political critics and opposition activists that were analysed are relatively young – launched between 2015 and 2019. Opposition channels BASE and Channel 16/12 are ranked 20th and 31st in terms of popularity of blogs on YouTube in Kazakhstan. [16] The number of social media accounts that discuss the country's public and political life, government policies and the corrupt political elite is steadily growing. Thus, people's craving for alternative "truths" is reflected in the popularity of YouTube accounts and Facebook pages of critics and opposition activists compared to the pages of the pro-presidential party. YouTube and Instagram accounts can be compared by the number of subscribers. The Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK) is the absolute champion on YouTube in comparison with the pro-presidential party of Kazakhstan and the president's press service. M. Abylazov has 138 times more subscribers on Youtube than Nur Otan and 63 times more subscribers than the presidential press service. The DCK leader has more followers on Instagram than the Nur Otan party and fewer than the presidential press service. Thus, undoubtedly, the movement is of great interest to the Kazakh public. Taking into account the threat of official prosecution for subscribing to DCK and liking their posts, the registered number of interested people could be much higher.

The complexity of the new media system is reflected in the variety of content available. The information disseminated through the extensive communications network ranges from fact-based investigative reporting by professional journalists to daring fabrications. Using a term coined by President Trump's adviser Kellianne Conway – "alternative facts" offered by the alternative press. In the age of new media, the boundaries separating these disparate types of information are becoming increasingly confusing. Professional media editors who regulate the flow of information by applying news principles and standards related to the public good are few and far between. They were replaced by social media editors and analysts, whose main motivation is to attract users to content, regardless of its news value. Audience members must work hard to distinguish fact from fiction, and also to distinguish important from irrelevant.

A number of explanations can be offered for the shift in the quality and quantity of political information. The technological capabilities of new media allow content to seemingly spread indefinitely. Social networks have a completely different structure than previous media platforms. Content can be rebroadcast without any significant third party filtering, fact checking, or editorial judgment. People with no prior journalism education or reputation can reach many users in no time [29]. The number of posts increases as they spread on news platforms and through personal social media accounts. In addition, the economic incentives underlying new media companies such as Google, Facebook and Twitter are based on reaching a wide audience that will generate ad revenue. Political content is used to attract consumers to

social media products, not to serve as a public service to inform citizens. Commercial pressure leads the media to publish the hot stories that get the most attention [30]. In addition, as platforms proliferate, similar content is widely dispersed as media power is concentrated in a small number of old and new media corporations. Search engines direct users to a limited selection of high-traffic, well-funded sites.

Other explanations focus on the nature of the American political environment, which has become extremely polarised, leading to the emergence of political programmes that promote fraudulent policies. A 2017 Pew Research Centre study found that the gap between Democrats and Republicans in basic political values, including the role of government, race, immigration, social safety nets, national security, taxes, and environmental protection, has grown to incredible proportions in Modern era. Two-thirds of Americans are firmly liberal or conservative, and few hold different ideological positions.

Speeches in new media outlets reflect these violent political divisions and often turn into expressions of hostility and ad hominem attacks. President Donald Trump used Twitter to spark controversy over NFL players who protested against racial oppression during the national anthem before the games. He used a derogatory term to refer to players who are predominantly African American and urged team owners to fire those supporting the demonstration. Trump's loud statements on social media have accused players of disrespecting the flag and the military, distorting the protest agenda and dividing the public along political and racial lines.

Political divisions are reflected in the presence of "echo chambers" in the media, where people choose their news and sources of information based on their proximity to the politics of other users. Modern new media echo chambers began to take shape during the first phase of new media, as conservative radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh attracted a loyal following [31; 32]. Social media has accelerated the development of echo chambers because it makes easier for people to learn about information shared by like-minded people on their personal digital networks, with 62% of American adults receiving news from social media. Even politically uninterested social media users often come across news articles by accident when scrolling their feed. The ability of social media to isolate people from different viewpoints deepens political polarisation.

A significant part of society perceives journalists as a detached elite that does not share their conservative values. The national press operates in a politically homogeneous, metropolitan, liberal bubble that has become part of the "establishment influencers". It is argued that the mainstream media do not have access to the general public. During the recent elections, this became apparent as legacy media institutions were unable to deal effectively with the frustration and anger of people outside the high-income and educational backgrounds.

Some researchers argue that new media is closing the gap between journalists and the general public, giving voice to those who feel left out. [2] The Tea Party, a conservative political movement centred around taxation and public debt, used social media to mobilise politically in the 2010 midterm elections. Tea Party candidates used social media to change public opinion about the campaign,

creating a sense of solidarity among groups that previously felt marginalised. Candidates pushing an extreme agenda have exacerbated this trend. Highly biased, flamboyant congressional candidates on both sides of the aisle, who spark political division and outrageous rhetoric, gather the most supporters on Facebook. They use social media to strengthen their political base.

Next, this study defines two basic concepts of social media – narrow and general. The narrow term encompasses forms and technical functions. Considering general categories, more emphasis is placed on nature and social functions. This meaning brings the concept of "social media" closer to the position of the media outlets, and, notably, it occupies a decisive place in Russian science. The concept of "social networks" is based on a participatory approach, when the communication process is carried out with equal participation of users and the media institution. Social networks can be thought of as "social structures of the Internet environment", the nodes of which are organisations or individuals, and the relationship between them is an established interaction. At the same time, the Western understanding of social media is based on classical theory, more related to new technologies [33; 34].

At the same time, the studies carried out by Bykov and Filatova suggest the following classification of social media platforms: blogs, social networks, data exchange services, social databases, referral services, and social news sites [20]. Social media gives its audience, which is largely disenchanted with conventional media, completely new mechanisms for interaction and interactive participation [35; 36]. In this regard, nowadays, in scientific and journalistic circles, the question often arises as to whether social networks should be considered as a new types of media outlets. There are different views on this issue. A very popular concept is that social networks cannot be considered media outlets because of the low quality of information. However, there is an opinion that such a phenomenon as social media, claiming to be called "journalism", does not exist. Some researchers view social media users not as journalists, but as witnesses delivering first-hand information to the audience, "without paying attention to television, newspapers, etc. news agencies in which they have lost the rest of their confidence". Platov sees the unprofessionalism of social media users as an advantage for two reasons. Firstly, users are not busy. And secondly, a professional journalist needs time to "grasp" a topic, while a witness covering events on social media lives in the situation he is writing about. In addition, unlike conventional media, social networks provide the audience with the most complete information due to the nature of its dissemination. However, it is too early to compare professional media and social networks in terms of influence on public opinion. Conventional media outlets continue to play a decisive role in shaping the information "agenda" [37; 38].

The relatively young history of social networks has given many examples of their use in opposition movements around the world: a wave of protest demonstrations in

Egypt, Tunisia and other Arab countries in 2010-2011; opposition rallies and processions of "angry citizens" in Russia in 2011-2012. There is every reason to assert that social media are becoming resources not only for the self-presentation of political and public figures and for involving network users and network activists in the political process, but also as a way of coordinating the civil movement, as well as coordinating the actions of protest groups. Although social networks have not played a major role in the history of protest movements in many countries over the past decade, they nevertheless often determined the tactical course of events and the organisation of revolutions.

## Conclusions

An analysis of the accounts of the civic movement leader indirectly indicates the real political, economic, and social situation. Not only the issues addressed by political activists, but also the reactions of users of social networks and viewers demonstrate the problems that are urgent for the country. Social media is an extremely important alternative channel of information in modern authoritarian countries. The role of specific people is very important in the online political sphere of Kazakhstan. YouTube has many personal accounts and news channels with political content, political statements and criticism. While the government does not have the necessary technology to directly condemn and control social media on the Internet, it is legally empowered to do so. This is why many activists and bloggers face harassment and jail sentences, as in the media autocracy. Several popular political bloggers are located outside of Kazakhstan. It is they who generate the harshest criticism and call for massive protests, setting deadlines for ordinary people.

The Internet is often seen as a technology capable of influencing human actions, regardless of context. However, the expectations that the Internet will fundamentally change political processes have largely failed to materialise due to its techno-deterministic standpoint. Studies on how the Internet influences politics erroneously suggests that digital platforms will revolutionise established policy frameworks over time. This assumption is not new: the telegraph and rotary printing press, and more recently radio and television, have been received with the same enthusiasm. However, new technologies are not as important as techno-deterministic approaches. Rather, their impact on society develops in accordance with the characteristics of the cultural, political, economic, and historical conditions in which they thrive.

## Acknowledgements

None.

## Conflict of Interest

None.

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## **ЗМІ та соціальні мережі в сучасній політиці Казахстану**

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### **Анотація**

**Актуальність.** Казахстан нещодавно приєднався до групи країн, на які впливає концепція "мережових соціальних рухів". Починаючи з 2013 року, багато блогів почали з'являтися на YouTube і Facebook. Використовуючи блоги в соціальних мережах, політичні активісти почали висловлювати своє невдоволення і ставити під сумнів легітимність політичного режиму, що склався після здобуття незалежності в 1990 році. Хоча соціальні рухи та суперечлива політика є невід'ємною частиною політичних систем, авторитарні режими за своєю суттю протистоять суперечливим колективним діям, оскільки вони сприяють руйнуванню таких режимів.

**Мета.** Мета таких режимів - утримувати владу якомога довше. Інтернет надає нові канали для донесення голосів громадян, поглядів меншин та політичної мобілізації.

**Методологія.** Блоги, онлайн-форуми, Facebook і Twitter вже надають громадянам нову форму публічної сфери та альтернативне джерело новин та інформації, яке розглядається як нова платформа для обміну новинами. Були взяті дані з блогів і друкованих ЗМІ, які повідомляли про найгірший громадянський конфлікт в пострадянській історії Казахстану. Отже, багато інформаційних джерел підтримували заяви уряду.

**Результати.** Цей приклад демонструє як важливість активної онлайн-спільноти в Казахстані, так і розуміння урядом важливості взаємодії зі своїми громадянами онлайн. Що можна дізнатися з прикладу Жанаозену про роль соціальних мереж в Інтернеті в політичній трансформації Казахстану? Яку роль відіграє уряд Казахстану в боротьбі з політичним інакомисленням через кіберпростір?

**Висновки.** Це дослідження сприятиме кращому розумінню поточних політичних процесів у Казахстані та продемонструє зв'язок між збільшенням використання соціальних мереж в Інтернеті та політичною активністю в Казахстані.

**Ключові слова:** засоби масової інформації; громадянська участь; Facebook; Twitter; державна політика.