

Review Article

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Emerging perspectives and contemporary debates: assessing the landscape of online media communication research in Central Asia

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Abstract: This review essay offers an exhaustive examination of the multifaceted role of online media within the Central Asian context. Comprising 11 sections, the essay scrutinizes diverse facets of online media's impact, spanning from its role in political dynamics to its implications for society, governance, national identity, cultural expression, and e-learning. By identifying recurring patterns, spotlighting ongoing debates, and revealing lacunae in extant scholarship, the essay aims to catalyze further research. Serving as an indispensable resource for scholars, policymakers, and those with an interest in the transformative potential of online media in Central Asia, the review underscores the complexity and dynamism inherent in the influence of online media within the region, fostering a more profound appreciation of this rapidly evolving field of study.

Keywords: Central Asia; Online Media; journalism; outlook of research; trend analysis

1 Introduction

In the contemporary era of digitalization, the influence of online media in sculpting societal, political, and cultural landscapes has emerged as a central theme in academic discourse. This is particularly salient for Central Asia, a region characterized by its distinct socio-political dynamics, rich cultural mosaic, and swift digital transformations

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(Freedman 2009; Kurambayev and Freedman 2020; Shafer and Freedman 2010). This review essay endeavours to probe this critical area of study, offering a comprehensive exploration of the diverse role of online media within this region.

Central Asia, encompassing the quintet of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – is a vibrant mosaic of cultures and past narratives. Positioned at a historical juncture of global significance, these nations have been forged by the vast shadows of Russia and China. This territory, which once echoed the footsteps of Silk Road merchants, has been a stage for diverse socio-political relationships, particularly in its complex relationships with Russia and China. The Russian footprint is etched from the days of the Tsars, meandering into the Soviet timeline, while China's ties are anchored in age-old commerce, now revitalized by initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative. Following the Cold War's curtain fall, the West, casting a glance at Kazakhstan's sprawling landscapes and Uzbekistan's time-honored hubs, discerned Central Asia as a geopolitical nexus, coveted for its energy treasures and as a strategic counterweight to Russian and Chinese dominions. In the current digital era, nations like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been caught in the digital whirlwind, reshaping societal pillars from governance to cultural articulation. The surge of Information and Communication Technologies has been a cornerstone in redefining the media terrains of places like Turkmenistan. Yet, the digital ecosystem, while deploying avenues for political dialogue and civic engagement in territories like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, grapples with quagmires of political hegemony, fiscal shackles, and societal paradigms that occasionally stifle open journalism. Variables such as Internet outreach, infrastructural confines, and political ambiance sway the digital media landscape, especially palpable in media environments like Uzbekistan. Despite these tribulations, the potential of digital evolution in Central Asia shines through, as virtual platforms invigorate civic dialogue, question age-old hierarchies, and cultivate a dynamic rapport with audiences.

Comprising specific sections, this essay utilizes a diverse array of scholarly works to present a detailed understanding of the current state of research in this field. Each section concentrates on a distinct aspect of online media's influence in the region, ranging from its role in shaping political dynamics and public opinion, to its impact on societal structures and governance, its influence on national identity and cultural expression, and its role in e-learning and digital education.

The objective of this review extends beyond mere summarization of existing literature; it seeks to identify patterns, spotlight debates, and reveal lacunae in the current body of knowledge (Kurambayev and Freedman 2020; Shafer and Freedman 2012). It aims to lay the groundwork for future research, fostering a deeper exploration of the digital frontier in Central Asia (Kurambayev and Masullo Chen 2017; Roberts 2013). As we traverse the various sections of this essay, we will engage with a spectrum of perspectives, reflecting the complexity and dynamism of online media's

influence in Central Asia (Mays and Grochek 2017; Qiu 2010; Shklovski and Struthers 2010; Wei and Kolko 2005).

This work serves as a necessary resource for scholars, policymakers, and anyone interested in understanding the transformative potential of online media in Central Asia (Freedman 2009; Kenny and Gross 2008; Srinivasan and Fish 2009). It invites readers to engage with the contemporary debates and emerging perspectives that define this critical aspect of Central Asian society (Ibold 2010; Kurambayev and Myssayeva 2022). As we embark on this journey, we will uncover the ways in which online media is reshaping the landscape of Central Asia, offering a window into the region's digital future (Rowe and Gilmour 2008; Tokbaeva 2021; Xu and Huang 2016).

We aim to stimulate critical thinking and inspire novel lines of inquiry, as underscored by Kurambayev and Freedman (2020) and Shafer and Freedman (2012). By presenting a synthesis of the current scholarly discourse, this review essay establishes a platform for intellectual exchange and debate. It encourages readers to partake in introspective analysis, reflective contemplation, and the development of their unique interpretative perspectives and symbolizes the transformative power of online media as a catalyst for change, an instrument for empowerment, and a conduit for expression in the Central Asian context (Freedman 2009; Kenny and Gross 2008; Srinivasan and Fish 2009).

The emphasis on politics, government oversight, and freedom of the press in this analysis is evident from the trends seen in the existing research. While the reason for this trend remains unclear, it's plausible to suggest that these elements significantly shape the digital media environment in Central Asia. This essay underscores how the media scene in the region is swayed by political forces, economic limitations, and societal expectations that deter in-depth reporting. Even though digital media platforms have immense potential, they're often restricted by these challenges. Journalists, for example, grapple with risks of physical danger and intimidation, which results in self-restraint and a narrowed range of online narratives. The dominant hold of media by the region's political and business powerhouses also affects the democratizing capacity of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Yet, this analysis doesn't solely focus on these aspects; it covers a wide array of subjects concerning online media in Central Asia. This encompasses the influence of online media on national ethos, cultural articulation, digital learning, and education. The revolutionary capacity of digital transformation and ICTs in the areas of journalism education, media enterprises, and their effect on cultural articulation is also examined.

Above all, this essay represents a journey through the digital landscape of Central Asia, encapsulating the region's past, present, and prospective future in the era of online media (Ibold 2010; Kurambayev and Myssayeva 2022). It extends an invitation to further explore, to interrogate, to explore, and to comprehend the

transformative role of online media in Central Asia (Rowe and Gilmour 2008; Tokbaeva 2021; Xu and Huang 2016). As we embark on this intellectual journey, we aspire to foster a more profound appreciation of the complexities and characteristics inherent in this dynamic field of study.

2 Methodology

The academic exploration of Central Asia is a vast and sophisticated field, and this review stands as a testament to the depth and breadth of research conducted on the region. Drawing primarily from English-language academic literature, this collection of studies is particularly notable for its emphasis on native perspectives. Remarkably, *two-thirds* of these works were either led by native speakers or involved collaborative teams that included native speakers of the region's distinct languages. This ensures a depth of understanding that is both in-depth and rooted in the lived experiences of Central Asia's diverse populations.

For instance, the study by Afacan Adanır et al. (2020) offers a comparative lens into learners' preferences in digital media in Kyrgyzstan, highlighting the evolving educational dynamics in the region. Alimova and Brumshteyn (2020) provide a critical perspective on the academic landscape of post-Soviet countries, emphasizing the coverage of papers by renowned databases like Scopus and Web of Science. Bryanov and his team's research in 2023 looks into the perceptions of foreign news coverage credibility, a topic that resonates deeply in our era of globalized information. Eskicorapci's (2018) exploration of media and democracy in Kyrgyzstan during the 2010 General Elections and Imamova's (2015) perspective on social media and online public debate in Central Asia are indicative of the region's evolving media landscape. Junisbai et al. (2015) work on mass media consumption in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan provides a grassroots perspective, offering insights from the ground up. The authors found that the Internet was the least used source of information about current events in both countries. They suggest that the overall growth in Internet use and the expansion of specialized groups using social media might coexist with a different dynamic among the general population. While more people have access to the Internet each year, and certain social and political subgroups are Internet savvy, these processes have not yet had a notable influence on societal patterns of Internet use.

The contributions of Kurambayev are particularly noteworthy. His studies, ranging from the impact of media practitioners' victimizations in Kyrgyzstan (2016) to the challenges of news translation in a bilingual context in Kazakhstan (2022), offer a comprehensive understanding of the journalistic landscape in Central Asia. His collaborative works with Freedman in 2019 and 2020 look into the ethics of

journalism in the region and the challenges faced by journalism and mass communication faculty. For instance, authors highlight the exceptional challenges for scholars undertaking J&MC research in Central Asia, such as lack of access to media content, the unwillingness of prospective respondents to participate in research, and the overall research culture in the region. The study also points out that the dominance of the United States in journal publishing poses additional barriers for Central Asian scholars. Furthermore, studies like those by Shklovski and Struthers (2010) and Shklovski and Valtysson (2012) analyze the digital ecosystem, exploring the role of domain name extensions in expressions of nationalism online in Kazakhstan and civic engagement in online publics, respectively. These studies, among others, not only offer a scholarly perspective but also reflect the socio-political and cultural complexities of Central Asia.

However, this also constitutes a limitation of the study. While the review offers a comprehensive perspective, it is primarily based on English-language literature. This might exclude some local or regional studies published in the native languages of Central Asia. Additionally, the focus on native speakers as authors or collaborators, while ensuring authenticity, might have excluded other significant works by non-native researchers with extensive experience in the region.

The studies were sourced from various academic journals and databases, with a particular emphasis on renowned databases like Scopus, EBSCO and Web of Science. The time frame for the selected studies ranged from 2003 to 2023, ensuring a mix of both historical and contemporary perspectives.

Each study was analyzed based on its relevance to the broader themes of education, media, journalism, digital communication, and socio-political dynamics in Central Asia. The findings are systematically organized into 11 carefully categorized sections, each reflecting a specific aspect of online media's diverse role within this vibrant context. These sections are not arbitrarily assembled but are methodically curated to encompass the broad spectrum of online media's implications, from its transformative potential to the inherent challenges in the region.

The initial sections of our discussion begin by examining the relationship between digitalization and Information and Communication Technologies within societal structures and governance. We engage in detailed discussions on how these digital forces help form national identity, language use, and political engagement, illustrated by examples such as the symbolic importance of domain name extensions in Kazakhstan's online nationalism and the resistance shown by the use of the Uzbek language on the Internet. As we move forward, our narrative goes deeper into the world of media, highlighting the obstacles journalists and media outlets face in this digital age. We reveal the realities of threats, harassment, and self-censorship and dissect the control national political and business elites have over media content. Our journey further explores the political corridors of the digital world, highlighting the

growing role of online media in fostering political expression and civic engagement. We explore the phenomena of citizen journalism and digital dissent, acknowledging the digital space's potential as a mobilization platform even under strict governmental constraints. However, our essay does not avoid addressing the digital landscape's limitations and challenges in Central Asia. We confront critical issues such as low Internet penetration, economic constraints, and sociopolitical norms that stifle critical reporting, acknowledging their impact on the reach and effectiveness of online media communication.

By segmenting the studies into these categories, the review aims to present a comprehensive understanding of the current state of research in this field, ensuring that each aspect of online media's influence in Central Asia is thoroughly explored.

3 The impact of digitalization and ICTs on society and governance

Digitalization and the proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have shaped society and governance in Central Asia in complex ways, impacting various facets of national identity, language use, media, and political engagement. The role of country code top-level domain names (ccTLDs) in Kazakhstan, for instance, is not merely symbolic but holds real meaning, particularly where notions of statehood are in flux (Shklovski and Struthers 2010). These domain extensions play a role in expressing nationalism online and shape people's perceptions of national identity and statehood. This dynamic is echoed in the case of Uzbekistan, where the usage of Uzbek within the dominant frames of Russian or English on the Internet serves as a form of resistance against the homogenizing forces of globalization (Wei and Kolko 2005). Furthering this discussion, Qiu (2010) and Mays and Grochek (2017) examine the implications of mobile phone penetration in Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, underscoring how digitalization and ICTs can interplay with local governance and societal norms.

Parallel to this, the digital space plays a significant role in the media landscape of the region. Challenges journalists face in Kyrgyzstan include threats of physical harm and harassment, leading to self-censorship and limiting the diversity of online content (Kurambayev 2016). Junisbai et al. (2015) found that the Internet was the least used source for information about current events in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, indicating a gap between the availability of online media and its consumption. Complementing these insights, Kurambayev (2022) discusses the increasing demand for translated news content due to the growth of online media consumption in Kazakhstan, a practice that often results in news dissemination

delays, particularly for those wishing to access news in their native language. This delay is attributed to the scarcity of resources required for translation, which also negatively impacts some news businesses.

ICTs have also influenced the political sphere in Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan's 2010 general elections, the potential of online media as an interactive technology linking news audiences, civic organizations, and the political world was explored, albeit with the caveat of limited Internet access in the country (Eskicorapci 2018). Expanding on this, Kurambayev and Masullo Chen (2017) explore the correlation between offline political engagement and online political voice among bloggers in Kyrgyzstan. Their findings suggest a positive relationship, demonstrating the significant role that digital technologies play in political expression and engagement. Schwartz (2011) further discusses the growing influence of citizen journalism in the region, using the example of WikiLeaks and its role in shaping the political landscape of post-Soviet Central Asia.

Despite these developments, control of media by national political and business elites is prevalent, which impacts the democratizing potential of ICTs. Freedman and Shafer (2011) highlight that in non-free media systems in Central Asia, opposition media outlets are often closed, and self-censorship among journalists is common. In Uzbekistan, the government revoked the licenses of all Internet service providers in 2000, leaving only the state-owned Turkmentelekom to provide Internet access (Shafer and Freedman 2003). Despite these constraints, Gobel (2013) highlights that ICTs can still provide a platform for dissent and mobilization.

The landscape of Asian communication research, as So (2010) notes, has relatively scarce activity, potentially affecting the practice and challenges of journalism in Central Asia. Shafer and Freedman (2010) provide a comprehensive analysis of the press in Central Asia, noting how past Russian and Soviet colonial domination impacts current mass media conventions and controls. Alimova and Brumshteyn (2020) further highlight the role of online platforms in facilitating the exchange of editorial board members and promoting the publication of research in high-ranking journals. This complex relationship between technology, political participation, and governance underscores the transformative potential and challenges of digitalization and ICTs in Central Asia.

Digitalization holds considerable transformative potential for Central Asia, as the research shows. The extent of the impact remains constrained by factors such as Internet penetration, economic constraints, and sociopolitical norms. Kenny and Gross (2008) highlight the low level of Internet penetration in the region and its implications on the reach and effectiveness of online media communication. They argue that the media landscape is heavily influenced by political pressure, economic constraints, and social norms that discourage critical reporting. This echoes the findings of Freedman (2009), who notes that economic constraints, in particular,

limit the potential for a truly independent online media landscape in Kyrgyzstan. Similarly, Freedman (2012) reports that barriers to Internet use in Kyrgyzstan include cost, physical location, and telecommunications infrastructure limitations.

Yet still, digital media outlets have demonstrated their potential as platforms for political dissent and civic participation. Kulikova and Perlmutter (2007) argue that blogs served as a platform for dissent during the Kyrgyz Revolution of 2005, offering an alternative to state-controlled media. This sentiment is echoed by Srinivasan and Fish (2009), who found that Kyrgyzstan's deregulated Internet policy facilitated the emergence of grassroots Internet blogging and website authorship, challenging the top-down tradition of patronage politics. Additionally, Yue et al. (2019) explore the role of social media platforms like Instagram in facilitating civic participation and expression of political opinions in Southeast Asia, indicating that digitalization and ICTs can empower individuals to engage in governance and societal issues.

The transformative potential of digitalization and ICTs extends to journalism education and media companies. Tokbaeva (2021) documents the digital transformation of post-Soviet media companies and its significant influence on operational dynamics, while Shafer and Freedman (2012) underscore the transformative potential of these technologies on society and governance in Central Asia. These transformations extend to journalism education, as Skochilo et al. (2013) note a shift towards new media in the Journalism and Mass Communication Department at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA). They also point out challenges associated with this shift, including job security and remuneration.

However, the rise of digital tools and self-publishing has complicated traditional concepts of press freedom and free speech. Turdubaeva (2014) observes that social media and digital platforms, especially Facebook in Kyrgyzstan, have emerged as alternative sources of information to traditional media, influencing public opinion on political matters. But challenges such as limited Internet connection, particularly in rural areas, temper their potential for political engagement. While recognizing these challenges, Lublinski et al. (2014) provide a case study of how the state media outlet OTRK in Kyrgyzstan has significantly increased its use of mobile and Internet communication, fostering a more interactive and responsive relationship with the audience.

Digitalization can serve both as platforms for dissent and tools for control. Shafer and Freedman (2009) highlight the importance of the Internet in fostering an independent media landscape but caution that this must account for the region's religious, cultural, historical values, as well as economic and political realities. However, Kerr (2018) observes that non-democratic regimes in Central Asia have adopted strategies to control Internet content and use, indicating a diffusion of control practices.

Finally, the role of the Internet in media development efforts and its impact on cultural expression is noteworthy. Shafer and Freedman (2009) underscore the Internet's importance in media development efforts, while Rowe and Gilmour (2008) discuss its influence on national identity and cultural expression in the field of sports media. Despite the challenges of political discussions online, the emergence of networked publics on online discussion forums in Kazakhstan show potential for participation leading to substantial social change (Shklovski and Valtysson 2012). In the context of rural areas, Hobbis et al. (2023) discuss the seismic impact of digital transformations, collapsing space and time, and mention initiatives such as 'Ilimbox' in Kyrgyzstan, which delivers digital content to students in rural areas.

4 The role of online media in shaping political dynamics and public opinion

Online media has become an influential element in the political landscape of Central Asia, serving various roles as identified, among others, by Maerz (2016), Linde and Karlsson (2013), and Freedman and Shafer (2011). Maerz (2016) acknowledges the use of e-government platforms in authoritarian regimes for both gaining legitimacy and exercising control. This is echoed by Freedman and Shafer (2011), who reveal national political and business elites exercising control over media through ownership, repressive media laws, and control of broadcasting licenses. In contrast, Linde and Karlsson (2013) propose that online media can enhance governance by promoting transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement, even in non-democratic settings.

While online media can offer several benefits, its limitations are worth noting. Linde and Karlsson (2013) warn about the potential misuse of e-participation benefits by ruling elites, especially in non-democratic regimes. This sentiment is echoed in Kussainova's (2021) study, which revealed information manipulation and the spread of populist statements on social networks in Kazakhstan. Freedman (2009) also speaks to these issues, noting the prevalence of self-censorship among journalists due to threats of harassment, governmental seizure of publications, and license sanctions.

In their studies of the role of online media in political movements, Roberts (2013), Shafer and Freedman (2010), and Freedman (2012) provide valuable insights. Roberts (2013) underscores the role of 'hub' websites in the Colour Revolutions of Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. These digital portals served as catalysts for public debate and protests, filling gaps that the mainstream press couldn't due to lack of funding. Shafer and Freedman (2010) and Freedman (2012) identify similar challenges for journalists in the region, including a lack of free-market sustainability, constraints on journalistic independence, and heavy government control.

Despite these challenges, online media continues to make its mark in the region. Freedman (2009) and Srinivasan and Fish (2009) explore the role of blogs and web news outlets in Kyrgyzstan, while Kenny and Gross (2008) discuss self-censorship and government control over Internet access, particularly in Turkmenistan. Freedman (2009) finds these platforms to be potent for producing, collecting, distributing, and exhibiting information, albeit with limitations. Srinivasan and Fish (2009) observe the emergence of grassroots Internet blogging and website authorship due to the nation's deregulated Internet policy. Kenny and Gross (2008) note the potential implications of Internet access control for information dissemination and freedom of expression.

Online media's impact extends to societal changes and civic participation. Yue et al. (2019), Turdubaeva (2014), and Schwartz (2011) explore these implications. They introduce the concept of digital citizenship, suggesting that online media platforms foster civic participation. Turdubaeva (2014) indicates a shift in perception with social network sites (SNS), such as Facebook, being viewed as alternative information sources in Kyrgyzstan. Schwartz (2011) also notes the rise of citizen journalism despite the challenges posed by low Internet penetration and repressive regimes.

The impact of online media during political upheavals is another aspect worth considering, as analyzed by Kulikova and Perlmutter (2007), Kurambayev and Masullo Chen (2017), and Freedman (2009). These researchers highlight the pivotal role of blogs in shaping the political landscape and facilitating information flow during the Kyrgyz Revolution of 2005. Kurambayev and Masullo Chen (2017) also found a positive correlation between offline political engagement and online political expression among Kyrgyzstani bloggers.

Lastly, online media's influence on international relationships and perceptions of news credibility is noteworthy, as seen in studies by Uysal et al. (2012), Bryanov et al. (2023), and Junisbai et al. (2015). Bryanov et al. (2023) illustrate the impact of online media in shaping perceptions of news credibility in post-Soviet countries like Kazakhstan, with news consistent with the dominant mainstream narrative perceived as more credible. Junisbai et al. (2015) highlight the Internet's under-utilization as a source of current events information in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, revealing a gap between the availability of online media and its use for news consumption.

5 The influence of online media on national identity and cultural expression

The influence of online media on national identity and cultural expression in Central Asia is a multitude of interactions of various factors, including the rapid rise of digital platforms, online publics, the role of language, and the negotiation of societal norms.

Keane and Yu (2019) highlight how online media, particularly platforms like Alibaba, allows for the transmission of Chinese culture to a broader audience, thereby influencing national identity and cultural expressions. This observation is echoed by Shklovski and Valtysson (2012), who underscore the emergence of various online publics in Kazakhstan, creating a participative space that can lead to substantial social change. Pavlenko (2013) also indicates the influence of online media, noting how the younger generation's preference for Russian-language Internet sites over their native languages could influence cultural and national identity.

The role of online media in shaping public cultural discourse, even in restrictive environments, is pivotal. Bryanov et al. (2023) argue that the alignment of a news item's content with the mainstream narrative can influence its perceived credibility, impacting national identity formation. This argument is paralleled by Peko et al. (2019), who indicate that mobile technology empowers journalists to interact effectively with the public, consequently influencing national identity and cultural expression. Despite the restrictive environments often faced by journalists in the region, online media has become a platform for cultural and national identities expression, even necessitating pseudonyms when dealing with sensitive issues (Kurambayev and Myssayeva 2022).

Exposure to global contexts through online media significantly impacts cultural identities. Ibold (2010) discovered that Internet use by urban Kyrgyz youth shapes their cultural identities as they encounter a broader global context, leading to a reassessment of traditional worldviews. Shklovski and Struthers (2010) align with this notion, arguing that country code top-level domains (ccTLDs) act as a form of cultural expression and identity formation online. This exposure to global information and experience online leads young people to decide that traditional worldviews are less relevant to the new global culture they experience online. The findings of the study reveal a tension and confusion arising from being in multiple transitions. The young people who participated in this study saw themselves as youthful, progressive, tech-savvy, globally connected, and urban. Yet they also respected 'traditions' and relied on tight-knit, local, pastoral, and often paternalistic family networks. However, urban youth are relying more than ever on global information and experience on the Internet. As they do so, they are increasingly judging the worldviews and behaviors of parents, teachers, political elites, and other traditional authority figures against that global context. The depth of global information at their disposal is unprecedented (Ibold 2010).

In the face of economic challenges and issues of censorship, online media's influence on cultural practices is evident. Janani (2019) notes that Western media outlets have significantly influenced national identity and cultural practices in Central Asia. Tokbaeva (2021) also emphasizes the growing importance of online media in these regions and underscores the changes it induces in leadership and

managerial ethics, which can potentially have implications for cultural expression. Shafer and Freedman (2009) add to this perspective, highlighting the Internet's role in fostering an independent media landscape that takes into account the region's cultural, historical, and economic realities.

The influence of online media on language use and political discourse, despite state restrictions, represents another crucial aspect of national identity in Central Asia. Wei and Kolko (2005) highlight the linguistic tension in Uzbekistan, where English and Russian dominate the Internet over Uzbek. In this context, Imamova (2015) notes the critical role social media plays in fostering public debate and empowerment, enabling Central Asians to express their ideas. Wilkinson and Jetyypayeva (2012) emphasize how the neweurasia Blog project promotes blogging and online communication, despite challenges like sporadic Internet access and government regulation.

Another aspect of online media's role in influencing national identity and cultural expression extends to the negotiation of societal norms and political engagement. Yue et al. (2019) highlight how young Muslim women in Southeast Asia use online platforms to negotiate cultural norms within their societies. This negotiation of societal norms illustrates the transformative power of online media. In Kyrgyzstan, Kurambayev and Masullo Chen (2017) argue that blogging has emerged as a powerful tool for free speech and self-expression, underlining the influence of online media on cultural expression and national identity. These findings illustrate how online media is reshaping the landscape of cultural expression and national identity in Central Asia.

6 E-learning and digital education

Findings from comparative studies, like the one conducted by Afacan Adanır et al. (2020), indicate the importance of considering learners' preferences for resources, activities, and communication tools used in e-learning environments. Their study at two public universities in Kyrgyzstan and Turkey revealed interesting similarities and differences in online learning preferences. Turkish learners found communication tools, online exams, and text-based course notes to be the most useful, whereas online group activities and wiki pages were not seen as useful enough. Contrastingly, Kyrgyz learners leaned more towards interactive materials, online exams, and social media tools, whereas they perceive online chats and pages to be less useful. These insights underscore the need for a learner-centric approach in e-learning resource and activity design.

In line with learner preferences, digital transformations in Central Asia are being employed to address accessibility issues, particularly in rural areas. The

'Ilimbox' initiative in Kyrgyzstan serves as a salient example, as this portable digital library provides books, videos, and Wikipedia articles to students in remote areas, illustrating the potential of digital education to bridge the urban-rural divide (Hobbs et al. 2023). Notwithstanding its challenges, online learning offers numerous opportunities, such as flexibility, accessibility, self-paced learning, and cost-effectiveness. Moreover, strategies to overcome online learning challenges have been proposed, such as setting a regular study schedule, establishing a dedicated study space, and actively engaging in online discussions (Zhapparaliev 2017).

Simultaneously, the impact of digital transformations and online communication on cultural identity and societal norms cannot be overlooked. Ibold (2010) observed that Internet use is catalyzing urban Kyrgyz youth to question and contextualize 'tradition' in a global context, facilitated by their ability to search and maintain social connections online. This shift towards online resources for education is indicative of the importance of digital literacy in the current educational landscape.

Moreover, the advent of digital phenomena like algorithmic journalism presents unique ethical challenges in the digital age. Kurambayev and Freedman (2019) noted the need for curriculum reform to better prepare future journalists for such digital transformations, suggesting a gap between online journalism education and practice. These findings, coupled with the increasing reliance on online resources by youth, highlight the need for integrating digital skills and ethics into educational curricula.

7 Role of online journalism in political movements

Online journalism has become an essential catalyst for political movements, particularly in the context of the Colour Revolutions and the Kyrgyz Revolution of 2005. Kurambayev and Masullo Chen (2017) found a correlation between offline and online political engagement among bloggers in Kyrgyzstan, illustrating how bloggers' political activities offline likely influence their online political expression. These findings resonate with the analysis by Roberts (2013), who argued that online journalism filled a void in the public sphere during the Colour Revolutions, acting as a catalyst for public debate and protests. Specifically, during the Kyrgyz Revolution, Kulikova and Perlmutter (2007) suggested that blogs significantly shaped the political landscape by managing information flow.

The interaction between traditional and online media was also evident in these movements. Kurambayev and Masullo Chen (2017) underlined the influence of newspapers on blogging frequency. Simultaneously, the study by Srinivasan and Fish (2009) demonstrated how the deregulation of the Internet in Kyrgyzstan enabled new political discourses to be shared among citizens, contributing to the organization of protests and the emergence of civil society.

However, the media landscape in these countries is often tightly controlled, posing significant challenges. Freedman and Shafer (2011) revealed that national political and business elites control media through ownership, repressive media laws, and broadcasting licenses. Moreover, critical web content is frequently banned, opposition media outlets are routinely closed, and self-censorship among journalists is common. In addition to these findings, Freedman (2009) pointed out the role of self-censorship, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, where journalists often refrain from criticizing government, businesses, and other centers of power due to risks of harassment and other threats. This censorship extends to online media, making it a considerable obstacle to a free press.

Despite these constraints, online journalism has shown a significant capacity to foster political participation and mobilization. McGlinchey and Johnson (2007) posited that the Internet and Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) can significantly shape the likelihood of mass mobilization, particularly when activists feel a part of broader protest networks. Echoing this, Toepfl and Litvinenko (2017) discussed the role of comment sections on national news websites across post-Soviet countries. They found that even in restrictive regimes, comment sections remain relatively common, suggesting that online journalism continues to play a crucial role in these environments.

In spite of the controlled political environment, social media has emerged as a powerful platform for political participation in Central Asia. Imamova (2015) noted that social media has blurred the line between consuming and generating information, enabling users to respond instantaneously to shared content and project their views. Meanwhile, Kurambayev (2016) revealed that journalists often employ avoidance strategies due to the potential for victimization, which can extend to online spaces. Despite these challenges, the exposure to the critical views of others seems to be helping social media users in Central Asia gain courage and engage more actively in political dialogues.

Thus, while there is a complex self-coordination between online and offline political engagement, and despite challenges of self-censorship and government control, online journalism has played a pivotal role in shaping political movements in post-Soviet Central Asia. However, this landscape continues to evolve and deserves further exploration.

8 Dichotomy of online media as a tool for control and a platform for dissent

In Uzbekistan, the government has exerted control over online media by revoking the licenses of all Internet service providers, leaving only the state-owned provider to

offer Internet access (Shafer and Freedman 2003). This move has significantly limited access to international media, including online platforms, to those who can afford cable television (Shafer and Freedman 2003). Similarly, in Tajikistan, the government regularly blocks the signals of popular platforms such as Facebook and YouTube (Osman 2019). In Turkmenistan, the rate of mobile phone penetration has been associated with societal and institutional implications, reflecting the potential of mobile technology as a tool for control by various authorities (Qiu 2010).

Despite these constraints, the potential of online media as a platform for dissent is evident in the case of WikiLeaks' impact on post-Soviet Central Asia (Schwartz 2011). Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, blogging has emerged as a powerful instrument for free speech and self-expression, especially among younger generations who have experienced two recent revolutions (Kurambayev and Masullo Chen 2017).

The governments in Central Asia, referred to by Freedman and Shafer (2012) as "repressitarian" (p. 5) regimes, view the Internet as a threat to their power and have implemented legislative and regulatory efforts to subject online and social media to the same strict constraints as traditional media (Freedman and Shafer 2012). However, opposition groups use the Web and social media platforms such as Facebook, Livejournal, MySpace, YouTube, and Twitter to communicate with sympathizers, build support, and circumvent government censorship and other control over mass media content (Freedman and Shafer 2012).

Nevertheless, the potential for online platforms to serve as spaces for dissent and alternative voices is also evident in the scholarly literature. Yazliyeva (2020) explores the emergence of citizen journalism and social media channels in Turkmenistan, suggesting a potential shift in the media landscape. Yet, Toepfl and Litvinenko (2021) point out the highly controlled online media environment in Turkmenistan, with a notable absence of public commentary, reflecting the country's repressive political regime.

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, citizens entrust a vast majority of their information to the state, acknowledging the state's immense penetration into personal space (Toqmadi and Zakharchenko 2021) but they do not foresee risks of such penetration and are not ready to actively protest against it. This is further exemplified by Freedman (2009), who discusses the post-revolutionary challenges that online journalism faced in Kyrgyzstan, such as self-censorship and economic viability.

In Turkmenistan, for instance, the rate of mobile phone penetration has been associated with societal and institutional implications, reflecting the potential of mobile technology as a tool for control by various authorities (Qiu 2010). Similarly, in Tajikistan, the government has sought to control the Internet to maintain its rule, blocking social media sites like YouTube and Facebook (Mays and Grochek 2017). And yet again, the Internet has also served as a platform for dissent and revolution. In

Kyrgyzstan, for example, the diffusion of Internet and mobile phone usage has been credited with helping to facilitate the “Tulip Revolution” through information dissemination and protestor mobilization (Mays and Grochek 2017). The Internet has also been seen as a crucial tool for fostering an independent media landscape, providing a platform for journalists to act as the public’s watchdog over centers of power and wealth (Shafer and Freedman 2009).

The described dichotomy is not just about control and dissent, but also about the transfer of control from the backend (the media) to the frontend (users/commenters). This is demonstrated in a study by Toepfl and Litvinenko (2017), which developed a ‘control transfer index’ (CTI) to measure the extent to which control over content is retained by media professionals and transferred to users. The study found that the level of press freedom/democracy of a country was a significant predictor for whether, and how openly, comment sections were implemented on news websites.

Peko et al. (2019) discuss the transformative role of technology in the Central Asian media landscape, enabling journalists to overcome press restrictions and engage more effectively with their audiences. They also address the issue of fake news, which has become a concern with the spread of social media in Central Asia. Imamova (2015) emphasizes the growing impact of social media in Central Asia, noting that posts by journalists and activists are shared and commented on by dozens of people, ultimately reaching thousands. Despite the tightly controlled political environment, social media has become a platform for political participation.

The government’s control over Internet access is a significant issue, particularly in Turkmenistan, where no responses were received for the online questionnaire used in the study, suggesting a lack of freedom in accessing and using online media platforms (Kenny and Gross 2008). During the Kyrgyz Revolution of 2005, the role of online media, especially blogs, was significant in shaping the political landscape and facilitating the flow of information. The state-controlled media in Kyrgyzstan produced unreliable and erroneous accounts of the unfolding events, leading to a surge in the population’s reliance on alternative sources of information, predominantly Internet-based (Kulikova and Perlmutter 2007).

Blogs played a pivotal role as a producer, collector, distributor, and exhibitor of information. They served as a temporary solution to the attempt by pro-government forces to squash the flow of information from opposition sites (Kulikova and Perlmutter 2007). This highlights the potential of online media to serve as a platform for opposition, even in a media environment characterized by significant government control and censorship. In their book “After the Czars and Commissars: Journalism in Authoritarian Post-Soviet Central Asia,” Freedman and Shafer (2011) reveal that national political and business elites control media through ownership, repressive media laws, and control of broadcasting licenses. Critical web content is often banned, opposition media outlets are routinely closed, and self-censorship

among journalists is common (Freedman and Shafer 2011). This control is further highlighted in the context of press freedom in the digital age, where the rise of social media and digital whistleblowing has increased the visibility of government infringements on speech and press (Martin et al. 2015).

Shklovski and Valtysson (2012) discuss three types of networked publics that emerged in their analysis of an online discussion forum in Kazakhstan. Despite the inability to hold open political discussions online, these publics can generate participation that can at times result in substantial social change (Shklovski and Valtysson 2012).

9 Role of social media and digital platforms in politics and governance

Srinivasan and Fish (2009) have pointed out the transformative power of digital platforms in shaping political discourse and mobilization in Kyrgyzstan, arguing that the deregulation of the Internet has resulted in the emergence of grassroots Internet authorship. Yue et al. (2019) have made similar observations, noting how platforms such as Instagram have become venues for civic participation and political expression. However, these platforms also pose complexities, as highlighted by Toqmadi and Zakharchenko (2021) in their discussions of how citizens in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have entrusted their personal data to the state. They emphasize the dual role of these platforms, which can be used for civic engagement but can also become instruments of state surveillance. This dichotomy is further highlighted by Freedman and Shafer (2012), who point out how governments in Central Asia perceive the Internet as a threat and therefore attempt to regulate online content. Nevertheless, these platforms have been employed by opposition groups to circumvent government censorship and control over mass media content, demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of civil society actors (Imamova 2015).

Mays and Grochek (2017) have emphasized the varying outcomes that digital platforms have had on democratization in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Bryanov et al. (2023) similarly note how dominant narratives on these platforms can shape public opinion and perceptions of news credibility, particularly in the context of international affairs. Toepfl and Litvinenko (2017) have taken a unique approach to the subject by developing a ‘control transfer index’ that assesses the degree of control that media professionals and users have over content in different post-Soviet countries. Peko et al. (2019) extend the discussion by exploring the transformative role of technology in enabling journalists to overcome press restrictions and engage more effectively with their audiences.

The influence of social media on political governance, especially in non-democratic regimes, has been examined by Linde and Karlsson (2013), who argue that e-participation can potentially improve the quality of governance, contingent on the existing political environment. In non-democratic regimes, the benefits of e-participation may be manipulated by the ruling elite to maintain their control. Roberts (2013) complements this view by identifying news 'hub' websites as key media actors in the Colour Revolutions. Kussainova (2021) then focuses on the role of social networks on political parties and movements in Kazakhstan, highlighting the associated risks such as information manipulation and the spread of populist statements. Meanwhile, Kinfu and Fadeeva (2020) provide a comprehensive analysis of the online media landscape in Kazakhstan, emphasizing its rapid development and the challenges it faces due to both internal and external influences.

In Kyrgyzstan, social media platforms, specifically Facebook, are viewed as alternative sources of information to traditional media, a viewpoint explored by Turdubaeva (2014). Skepticism towards traditional media has led to an increasing reliance on social media for information. Shklovski and Valtysson (2012) also discuss the emergence of three types of networked publics on online discussion forums in Kazakhstan, emphasizing the potential of online media to foster public discourse and social change. Lublinski et al. (2014) examine the ambitious endeavor of transforming state-controlled media into public service media in Kyrgyzstan, demonstrating the role of digital technologies in fostering a more interactive and responsive relationship with audiences.

In stark contrast, the online media landscape in Turkmenistan is strictly controlled by the state, with all domestic media constantly praising the president, as noted by Toepfl and Litvinenko (2021). However, despite the strict state control and censorship, the emergence of citizen journalism and social media channels may pose a challenge to the existing political powers (Yazliyeva 2020). Finally, Kerr (2018) provides an overview of Internet policies across the former Soviet Union, revealing a trend toward increased surveillance and control of online content by non-democratic regimes. Despite these challenges, Imamova (2015) emphasizes the empowering potential of social media in Central Asia, noting its role in stimulating critical thinking, fostering dialogue among citizens, and enabling societal change.

10 Cultural influence of online media

Studies show the significance of cultural influences in Central Asian information environments. For instance, Ifert Johnson (2006) discusses how music videos, a form of visual media often shared and viewed online, contribute to the shaping of national identity in Kazakhstan. The prevalence of traditional themes and imagery in these videos reinforces a common heritage and contributes to national identity. This suggests

that online media can serve as a platform for individuals to negotiate cultural norms and express their identities in ways that may not be possible in offline spaces.

In a similar vein, Yue et al. (2019) explore how Southeast Asian youth, particularly young Muslim women, use online platforms to express their identity and engage in civic participation. They argue that these digital citizens use online information to make decisions about public discourses, such as those related to homosexuality and gendered forms of public expression.

Language use is another crucial aspect of cultural influence in online media. Pavlenko (2013) notes that younger generations in post-Soviet states, particularly in Kazakhstan, tend to favor Russian-language Internet sites over those in their native languages. This preference is attributed to the superior quality, greater variety, and higher speed of Russian-language sites. This trend suggests that online media can influence language preferences and, by extension, cultural identity. Furthermore, Keane and Yu (2019) discuss the role of online media in China's digital expansion in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Online media allows for the instantaneous transmission of Chinese culture, both within the Chinese mainland and to territories outside China, servicing the cultural needs of the Chinese diaspora and reaching out to new audiences. This highlights how online media can facilitate the global spread of culture, potentially influencing cultural practices and expressions in other regions, including Central Asia.

In Kazakhstan, the influence of Russian programming on television has been significant, with Russian programs either being broadcast directly, relayed in part by domestic channels, or comprised of individual programs purchased for local broadcast (Thomas 2005). This influence could potentially extend to online media, with Russian websites and online platforms possibly being popular in the country. The media landscape in Kazakhstan is also shaped by regulatory measures, such as the Media Law that allows foreign investors to own less than 20 percent of television stations (Thomas 2005). These regulations could potentially apply to online media as well, affecting the development and operation of online platforms in the country.

In contrast, the cultural influence of online media in Kyrgyzstan is closely tied to the shaping of youth identities. Ibold's (2010) study on urban Kyrgyz youth found that Internet use, particularly through social networking sites, plays a significant role in shaping their cultural identities. The Internet exposes these young people to ideas, people, and information to an extent unimaginable a generation ago, leading them to place their cultural inheritance in a global context and question traditional worldviews. This has resulted in the emergence of youth identities that are idiosyncratically local and uniquely 'in between', neither traditionally Kyrgyz, global, Western, nor 'Russified' (Ibold 2010).

In Uzbekistan, the Internet has influenced the linguistic landscape, and by extension, the country's cultural identity. The predominance of English and Russian

on the Internet has led to a complex environment filled with assimilation and resistance, with online language use serving as a form of resistance against the pressures of globalization and government censorship (Wei and Kolko 2005). The region's media landscape, while still in its nascent stages, is grappling with the enduring impact of Soviet-era propaganda and the dominance of Western media outlets (Janani 2019). This has led to a unique mix of global and local influences, as seen in the case of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

11 Online media and political participation

Online media plays an undeniably complex role in shaping political participation in Central Asia. This influence is largely determined by several key factors: the level of Internet penetration, the nature of the political regime, and the dynamics of public engagement with online platforms. Researchers such as Turdubaeva (2014) and Eskicorapci (2018) have noted the growing importance of online platforms like Facebook in countries like Kyrgyzstan, where they provide alternative sources of information to traditional media. Eskicorapci further emphasizes that the Internet has the potential to widen public discourse by reaching a broader geographic audience. This development is further supported by Mays and Grochek's (2017) comparative analysis, which links the diffusion of Internet and mobile phone usage to differing democratic outcomes in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

McGlinchey and Johnson's (2007) comprehensive analysis extends this discussion by examining how Internet and Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) can affect mass mobilization and political participation. They found that in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where international aid organizations and non-governmental organizations provide capital for ICT infrastructure, the regulatory environment is more open, impacting political change and social mobilization. In complement, Imamova (2015) stresses the growing impact of social media in Central Asia as a platform for political participation, highlighting the capacity of online platforms to foster critical thinking and trigger a will for change.

Conversely, in an environment with active state censorship and surveillance such as Kazakhstan, the nature of online public engagement is more complex. Shklovski and Valtysson's (2012) study identified the existence of mundane-publics, issue-publics, and counter-publics that can generate participation resulting in substantial social change, even within these restraints. Despite such possibilities, Freedman and Shafer (2012) discuss how governments in the region often view the Internet as a threat, leading to strict constraints on online and social media. Nonetheless, they also suggest these platforms can play a role in disseminating news and information about matters of public concern.

Despite the challenges, there is evidence that online media can still facilitate political engagement even within restrictive political regimes. For example, Gobel (2013) and Linde and Karlsson (2013) suggest that ICTs can both strengthen and weaken authoritarian rule and improve the quality of governance in non-democratic settings. However, this depends on the existing political environment. This perspective is illustrated by Roberts' (2013) research on the Colour Revolutions, where digital portals filled gaps in the public sphere that could not be filled by a mainstream press compromised by lack of funds.

Looking more closely at individual online behaviors, Kurambayev and Masullo Chen's (2017) research in Kyrgyzstan found a positive correlation between offline political engagement and online political expression among bloggers, with those engaged in offline politics more likely to express their political thoughts online. Additionally, Yue et al. (2019) explored the concept of digital citizenship in Southeast Asia, suggesting that it is manifested in everyday online self-presentation practices.

Kussainova (2021) examined the influence of social networks on political parties and movements in Kazakhstan, highlighting how they are used to manage voters while also acknowledging the risks of information manipulation. Similarly, Srinivasan and Fish's (2009) research shows how the deregulation of the Internet in Kyrgyzstan has enabled new political discourses to be formed and shared, contributing to the organization of protests and the emergence of civil society. Thus, despite the restrictions and challenges, online media can play a significant role in promoting political participation and fostering democratic developments in Central Asia.

12 The evolution and influence of online media

The evolution and influence of online media in Central Asia, as suggested by a wealth of scholarly research, reflects the unique socio-political and cultural context of the region. Kussainova (2021) offers an in-depth analysis of how social networks in Kazakhstan have been exploited by political parties to manage voters proactively. Martin et al. (2015) warn that the digital age has heightened the visibility of government overreach and the mistreatment of journalists, while Kurambayev and Freedman (2019) emphasize the ethical challenges of algorithmic journalism and the need for journalism education reform. This is supported by Janani (2019), who stresses the enduring impact of Soviet propaganda and censorship issues in Central Asia, further complicating the media landscape.

The impact of online media on journalism in the region is explored further by Kurambayev and Issenov (2020), who reveal how the digital shift has impacted the professional lives of journalists in Kazakhstan, with remuneration often tied to the number of views their articles generate. These challenges and opportunities of

online media resonate with Shaikh's (2017) global study, which shows that while platforms such as news websites and blogs are gaining traction, television continues to be a primary information source. Skochilo et al. (2013) corroborate this view, suggesting a significant shift towards new media, but also acknowledging the challenges this presents in terms of job security and remuneration for journalists.

Online media's historical evolution in Central Asia traces back to the arrival of the Internet in Kazakhstan in 1991 and the recognition of websites as media in 2001 (Kinfu and Fadeeva 2020). Similar strides in digitalization are observed in Lublinski et al.'s (2014) study of Kyrgyzstan's state media outlet OTRK's robust online presence. Thomas (2005) adds to this by noting the demand for diverse media content in Kazakhstan in the late 1990s, potentially extending to online platforms, further illustrating online media's transformative influence in the region.

The dynamics of online media are further complicated by the pressures in the research environment. Kurambayev and Freedman (2020) discuss the challenges faced by journalism and mass communication faculty in Central Asia, such as resorting to unethical practices to publish in Scopus-indexed publications. This is juxtaposed with the work of Shafer and Freedman (2012), which examines the constraints on press freedom in post-Soviet Central Asia and highlights the broader pool of at-risk communicators due to the rapid spread of communication technologies and Internet access.

The influence of online media extends to sports and public relations. Rowe and Gilmour (2008) discuss the role of the Internet in sports media coverage, contributing to a general cultural prominence for sports. Xu and Huang (2016) and Tokbaeva (2021) stress the increasing integration of digital technologies in the PR field and the digital transformation of media companies in the post-Soviet space, marking the growing importance of online media.

Despite the potential of online media, its uptake in Central Asia has been slow (Junisbai et al. 2015). However, the rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Odnoklassniki, and VKontakte shows a new direction (Imamova 2015). Nevertheless, as Srinivasan and Fish (2009) assert, the rise of grassroots Internet authorship, facilitated by Kyrgyzstan's deregulated Internet policy, challenges traditional top-down politics, suggesting the transformative potential of online media in Central Asia despite the unique challenges.

13 The practice and challenges of journalism in Central Asia

The media landscape in Central Asia, marked by a complex relationship between traditional and digital media, experiences both significant challenges and unique

opportunities. Government control, self-censorship, low Internet penetration, and an unfortunate legacy of the Soviet press system create considerable obstacles for the development of an independent media sector in the region (Kenny and Gross 2008; Shafer and Freedman 2010). The dominance of the United States in journal publishing also poses significant barriers for Central Asian scholars (Kurambayev and Freedman 2020), while digital transformations such as the 'Ilimbox' in Kyrgyzstan, a portable digital library that facilitates education and information access in rural areas, have initiated unique approaches to overcoming these barriers (Hobbis et al. 2023).

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the fear of potential victimization, including lawsuits, physical attacks, and arrests, has led to self-censorship among journalists, while limited access to the Internet (with only 16.3 percent of the population having Internet access in 2010, all of whom were from the capital city of Bishkek) remains a notable challenge (Eskicorapci 2018; Kurambayev 2016). Despite this, the Internet, during the Colour Revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, played a crucial role in influencing public debate and protests (Roberts 2013). Yet, with the continued popularity of television as a medium for information seeking, even among daily Internet users, the challenges faced by media companies shifting towards digitalization are far from resolved (Shaikh 2017; Tokbaeva 2021).

The state of press freedom in Central Asia is monitored by domestic and international entities, who protest censorship and decry journalists' arrests, prosecutions, harassment, and murders (Shafer and Freedman 2012). The rapid spread of new communication technologies, while making it harder to fully control information, has also broadened the pool of at-risk professional and nonprofessional "communicators" and emboldened governments to extend the types of legal and regulatory constraints already imposed on traditional media (Shafer and Freedman 2012). The use of e-government platforms in Central Asia to legitimize authoritarian regimes is also significant, emphasizing the interaction of historical, political, and technological factors that shape journalism in Central Asia (Maerz 2016).

In the bilingual context of Kazakhstan, the need for translation of news content leads to delays in news dissemination, impacting some news businesses (Kurambayev 2022). This challenge is being addressed through collaborations between local and international news outlets, such as the agreement between Egemen Qazaqstan and the New York Times to translate articles into Kazakh (Kurambayev 2022). However, like in other Central Asian countries, the state of the media in Kazakhstan is largely determined by the quantity and quality of Internet publications and the development of Internet technologies (Kinfu and Fadeeva 2020).

In Uzbekistan, limited access, technological constraints, and significant government control characterize the media landscape, with access to international media, including online platforms, being restricted (Shafer and Freedman 2003). The media landscape in Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states is controlled by

national political and business elites through ownership, repressive media laws, and control of broadcasting licenses (Freedman and Shafer 2011). Even so, online and social media platforms play a role in disseminating news and information, with opposition groups using the Web and social media to communicate with sympathizers, build support, and circumvent government censorship. Nevertheless, the governments' use of technology to control and limit Internet use is a significant challenge, highlighting the dichotomy of online media as both a tool for control and a platform for dissent (Freedman and Shafer 2012; Hobbis et al. 2023).

The transition to new media in the Central Asian region is marked by the influence of a number of factors, including economic constraints, regulatory measures, and the shifting nature of dominant narratives. Skochilo et al. (2013) underscore the ongoing shift towards new media in the region, evidenced by institutions like the Journalism and Mass Communication Department at the American University of Central Asia developing courses such as "New Media". In contrast, economic realities such as low salaries for journalists have led to a trend of journalism alumni moving into public relations, advertising, or communications units of international organizations (Skochilo et al. 2013). Similarly, in Kazakhstan, the salaries of journalists often depend on key performance indicators such as the number of views their online articles generate or the number of articles they write per week or month (Kurambayev and Issenov 2020).

However, these transitions are further complicated by regulatory measures that restrict the development of free and independent media. In Kazakhstan, for instance, Thomas (2005) discusses regulatory measures such as the Media Law that restricts foreign investors' ownership of television stations. These measures have the potential to extend to online media, affecting the operation of online platforms in the country. The influence of dominant narratives on the perceived credibility of news is another significant factor in the new media landscape, as highlighted by Bryanov et al. (2023). They found that the consistency of a news item's content with the dominant mainstream narrative significantly influences its perceived credibility, particularly in the context of international news.

Freedman (2009) highlights the significant role of online media platforms in the professional lives of journalists in Kyrgyzstan, where blogs and web news outlets can produce, collect, distribute, and exhibit information, sometimes even outpacing international media in covering remote events. Similarly, Lublinski et al. (2014) explore the ambitious endeavor of transforming state-controlled media outlets into public service media (PSM) in Kyrgyzstan. They highlight the significant role of online media and digital technologies in this transformation process, as the state media outlet OTRK has significantly increased its use of mobile and Internet communication, maintaining a robust online presence, including a website with live streaming capabilities, a Facebook page, and a Twitter account.

At the same time, these new platforms and technologies present their own challenges. As Freedman (2009) notes, journalists and news organizations often

restrain themselves from playing a responsible watchdog role over government, businesses, and criminal organizations due to the risk of harassment, physical attacks, license sanctions, and governmental seizure of publications. These factors underscore the need for journalism education to adapt to these changes in the media landscape, as pointed out by both Skochilo et al. (2013) and Freedman (2009). Meanwhile, Kurambayev (2016) reveals that journalists in Kyrgyzstan employ avoidance strategies due to potential victimization, including threats of physical harm and harassment. This victimization can also extend to online spaces, adding another layer of complexity to the new media landscape in Central Asia.

Despite the numerous challenges, online platforms also present opportunities for regional and international collaboration. Alimova and Brumshteyn (2020) discuss the role of online platforms in promoting interaction between journals from Russia and other post-Soviet countries. These platforms facilitate the exchange of editorial board members and encourage authors to publish in high-ranking journals, both national and foreign. However, they also note that the content and placement of information on these websites, particularly regarding ethics, are not uniform, potentially impacting the visibility and accessibility of research related to online media and communication in the Central Asian region.

Looking at the broader societal context, Manzella and Yacher (2005) highlight the ongoing transition from Soviet-era control to a more independent press in the Kyrgyz Republic, with challenges such as government crackdowns, libel suits, and the closure of independent news outlets persisting. In contrast, social media platforms are increasingly viewed as an alternative source of information to traditional media in Kyrgyzstan, as per Turdubaeva (2014). Despite skepticism towards traditional media, which is perceived as serving the interests of those in power, social media platforms are seen as independent sources of information. Yazliyeva (2020) also notes the emergence of citizen journalism and social media channels in Turkmenistan's otherwise strictly controlled online media environment. Finally, the increasing reliance on mobile technologies by journalists in Central Asia, as highlighted by Peko et al. (2019), underlines the transformative role of technology in the media landscape. Hence, along with these transformations, journalists face challenges such as the constant need to be on call, high costs, and the issue of fake news.

14 Conclusion

The outlook of research on online media communication in Central Asia is multifaceted and dynamic. The region, characterized by its unique socio-political dynamics and rapid digital transformations, has witnessed a significant influence of online media in shaping societal, political, and cultural landscapes. This review

underscores the transformative potential of online media, from its role in political dynamics to its implications for society, governance, national identity, cultural expression, and e-learning. Several key takeaways emerge:

Digitalization and ICTs Impact on Society and Governance: Digitalization and the proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have profoundly transformed societal structures and governance mechanisms in Central Asia. In countries like Kazakhstan, country code top-level domain names (ccTLDs) have moved beyond mere symbolic representations. They actively play a role in expressing nationalism online, shaping perceptions of national identity and statehood. In Uzbekistan, the use of the Uzbek language within dominant frames of Russian or English on the Internet serves as a form of resistance against the homogenizing forces of globalization. Furthermore, the deep penetration of mobile phones in countries like Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan has implications that reach into the very fabric of local governance and societal norms, indicating the deep intertwining of technology with daily life and governance.

The Pivotal Role of Online Media in Political Dynamics: The ascendancy of online media has positioned it as a formidable determinant in the political contours of Central Asia. Authoritarian establishments have adeptly leveraged these platforms, particularly e-government systems, to consolidate their legitimacy and fortify their dominion. Conversely, these digital avenues also offer a democratizing potential. Digital platforms, notably blogs, have emerged as pivotal conduits for civic discourse and mobilization, addressing lacunae left by conventional media outlets due to diverse impediments. Nonetheless, this digital environment is not devoid of its perils. The orchestrated manipulation of information and the proliferation of populist rhetoric on social networks, exemplified by trends in nations such as Kazakhstan, underscore the potential pitfalls of online media's instrumentalization for political objectives.

Challenges and Opportunities in Journalism in the Digital Age: The digital age, while offering a plethora of opportunities for journalists in Central Asia, also brings with it a set of unique challenges. Journalists in the region often face threats of harassment, governmental seizure of publications, and license sanctions, leading to a prevalent culture of self-censorship. Economic constraints, such as low salaries for journalists, further limit the potential for a truly independent online media landscape. This is further complicated by barriers like cost, physical location, and telecommunications infrastructure limitations. Yet, amidst these challenges, digital media outlets, especially blogs, have shown their potential as platforms for political dissent and civic participation, as was evident during events like the Kyrgyz Revolution of 2005.

Collaborative Opportunities through Online Platforms: The advent of online platforms is fostering a new era of regional and international collaborations in Central Asia. Platforms have been instrumental in promoting interaction between journals from Russia and other post-Soviet countries, facilitating the exchange of editorial board

members and promoting the publication of research in high-ranking journals, both national and foreign. However, this collaborative spirit is not without its challenges. The content and placement of information on these websites, especially regarding ethics, are not uniform. Such inconsistencies can impact the visibility and accessibility of research related to online media and communication in the Central Asian region.

Central Asia offers a wealth of uncharted scholarly avenues for future research, especially in the area of digitalization. The economic impacts of this digital shift, particularly how online platforms drive economic growth, entrepreneurship, and job creation, are pivotal to understanding the region's future trajectory. Equally vital is the exploration of cultural and social dynamics, as online media reshapes cultural norms, social behaviors, and interpersonal relationships. Environmental challenges in Central Asia, amplified by global sustainability priorities, underscore the role of digital advocacy in promoting eco-friendly practices. In today's health-centric era, the potential of online platforms to enhance health awareness and medical accessibility in the region is undeniable. Exploring these areas in subsequent research will enrich our comprehension of Central Asia's evolving relationship with online media.

Overall, this review essay offers a thorough comprehension of the impact of online media in the Central Asian context. It highlights the dynamic evolution of this field of study, unearthing both the potential opportunities and inherent challenges that are poised to shape its future trajectory. The essay encourages readers to contemplate the wider ramifications of digitalization, to deliberate upon the ethical considerations it engenders, and to engage with the cultural subtleties that characterize the digital landscape of Central Asia. It extends an invitation to perpetuate the discourse, to interrogate and challenge prevailing paradigms, and to carve out innovative pathways in the quest to understand the digital frontier of Central Asia.

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