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How the journalism community in Kazakhstan views journalism education

The main objective of this study is to analyze journalism education in the context of the former Soviet Union Republic of Kazakhstan. Although many studies already exist globally about journalism education, Kazakhstan is one of the many developing countries that are largely absent from academic knowledge. Specifically, this study seeks to understand widely perceived outdated journalism education curriculum and its implications for the profession of journalism in this Central Asian country. The proposed broad research question: What substantive changes (if any) do journalism stakeholders see the need to insert in journalism programs in the country?

To answer this research question, authors conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 24 working journalists, editors and students of journalism across the country. The interviews were undertaken in February-May, 2019.

Some recent developments highlight the urgent need for such study. For example, there was a public call for closure of all journalism programs at universities in part because the Kazakhstan universities are said to be failing to prepare knowledgeable journalists who can shoot, edit and undertake journalistic tasks. Many local editors publicly describe college and university graduates as lacking skills to be able to work in journalism. The main problem of journalism is similar to the problems in the technology industry - it changes too quickly. In addition, universities are generally not well equipped with the necessary equipment, on which students could work or practice. The findings are discussed in relation to practical implications for journalism education in the context of Kazakhstan.

Key words: journalism education, journalists, professionalism, students of journalism, Kazakhstan.

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Қазақстандағы журналистика біліміне көзқарас

Ғылыми-зерттеу жұмысының негізгі мақсаты – Кеңес Үкіметі кезеңіндегі Қазақстан журналистика саласының біліміне сараптама жүргізу. Әсілінде, журналистика саласына қатысты түрлі зерттеу жұмыстары жүргізілгені анық. Алайда, Қазақстанда дәл осы салада академиялық білім толықтырылмаған. Бұл зерттеу жұмысының негізгі бағыты ескірген оқу жоспарының олқылығы мен оның кәсіби журналистикаға ықпалын жан-жақты қарастыру. Сонымен қатар, кәсіби мамандардың пікірін негізге ала отырып, «Еліміздегі журналистика біліміне қандай бағдарламаны енгізген дұрыс?» деген сұраққа жауап айтылды. Осы сауал бойынша зерттеу жұмысының авторлары 24 адаммен сұхбат жүргізген. Атап айтқанда, журналист, редактор және журналистика факультетінің студенттері атсалысқан. Сұхбат 2019 жылдың ақпан-мамыр айында жүргізілді.

Бүгінгі таңда журналистика саласында болып жатқан түрлі өзгерістер мен айтулы оқиғалар зерттеу жұмысын жүргізуге негіз болып отыр. Өйткені, бұған дейін журналистика факультетін жабуға қатысты бір топ қоғам белсенділері дау көтерген еді. Олардың пікірінше, еліміздің жоғары оқу орындары кадрларды кәсіби тұрғыда өте төмен деңгейде дайындайды. Тіпті, телерадио саласының қабырғасында жүрген кей тілшілерге әлі де сапалы білім мен тәжірибе жеткіліксіз.

Өйткені бүгінгі журналистика күн санап өзгеруде. Ал білім ордалары бүгінге дейін толыққанды қажетті құрал-жабдықтармен қамтамасыз ете алмай отыр. Оның салдарынан студенттер өз білімдерін тәжірибемен ұштастыра алмауда. Сол себепті, жас мамандарға теориядан бұрын тәжірибе жеткіліксіз. Сондықтан зерттеу жұмысының нәтижесінде кәсіби мамандар мен болашақ журналистер жоғарыда айтылған өзекті мәселелерді шешу жолдарын ұсынды.

Түйін сөздер: журналистика білім, журналист, кәсіби журналистика, студент-журналист, Қазақстан.

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Как журналистское сообщество в Казахстане оценивает высшее журналистское образование

Основной целью данного исследования является анализ журналистского образования Республики Казахстан в контексте бывшего Советского Союза. Хотя во всем мире уже существует множество исследований в области журналистского образования, Казахстан является одной из многих развивающихся стран, которые в значительной степени отсутствуют в академических знаниях. В частности, это исследование направлено на то, чтобы понять широко распространенную устаревшую учебную программу по журналистике и ее влияние на профессию журналистики в этой центральноазиатской стране. Предлагаемый широкий исследовательский вопрос включает: какие существенные изменения (если таковые имеются), по мнению заинтересованных сторон в журналистике, необходимо включить в программы журналистики в стране?

Чтобы ответить на этот вопрос исследования, авторы проводят подробные качественные интервью с 24 работающими журналистами, редакторами и студентами факультетов журналистики по всей стране. Интервью были проведены в феврале-мае 2019 года.

Некоторые из последних событий подчеркивают острую необходимость в таком исследовании. Например, был публичный призыв к закрытию всех программ журналистики в университетах, отчасти потому, что, как говорят, казахстанские университеты не готовят знающих журналистов, которые могут снимать, редактировать и выполнять журналистские задачи. Многие местные редакторы публично говорят, что выпускникам колледжей и университетов не хватает навыков для работы в журналистике. Основная проблема журналистики похожа на проблемы в технологической отрасли - она меняется слишком быстро. Кроме того, университеты, как правило, недостаточно оснащены необходимым оборудованием, чтобы студенты могли работать или практиковаться. Полученные результаты обсуждаются в связи с практическими последствиями для журналистского образования в контексте Казахстана.

Ключевые слова: журналистское образование, журналисты, профессионализм, студенты факультета журналистики, Казахстан.

Introduction

On July 4, 2019, the news website Today.kz reported, citing KazInform, that Kazakhstan President Kasym-Jomart Tokaev suggested an urgent need to improve quality of education in Kazakhstan. He said that 70 percent of Kazakhstani employers are not satisfied with the skills of Kazakhstan university graduates and that the quality of education in the relevant educational institutions is still low. The president suggested creating 180 colleges and 20 innovative universities in the country within the coming three years to further modernize the higher education system. Although journalism was not singled out in this President's statement, there was a public suggestion and discussion in 2017 about potentially

closing all journalism programs at universities in Kazakhstan except Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (KazNU), citing that journalism graduates have not learned the basics of the profession or the core principles of journalism. Given such recent context in Kazakhstan, there is a scholarly urgency to re-visit the journalism education quality in the country.

Although much work has been done about journalism education in wider Asia and elsewhere, this study is distinctive. First, this study is undertaken at a time of heightened concern in Kazakhstan about the quality of journalism education. Second, this study involves the broad journalism community, such as journalists, editors, and students, while previous studies focused on either journalists, faculty

members or students alone. Third, authors had direct access to journalism practice and journalism education. Specifically, the first author is a working journalist for one of the Kazakhstan state news outlets while the second author is a faculty member at a university in Kazakhstan. And finally, understanding how journalism teaching is perceived by other stakeholders of journalism community is important for understanding professional expectations and how they fit into the larger worldview of journalism education in Kazakhstan and wider Central Asia. To contribute to ongoing debates about the quality of journalism education and how to move forward to better prepare future generations of Kazakh journalists, this study aims to analyze perceived practical gaps in classrooms and in newsrooms through the views and words of working journalists, editors, and students of journalism programs.

This study drew on in-depth qualitative interviews with 24 professional journalists, editors and students of journalism of Kazakhstan to understand how members of the journalism community perceive journalism education in the country. The authors examine the perceived quality of journalism education from newsroom to classroom perspective. This paper begins by exploring in more depth the context of journalism and journalism education in Kazakhstan and then explains how education relates to professional journalists.

Literature Review

Today, journalism education in Kazakhstan is available in higher education, media institutions, and non-governmental organizations. There are currently 22 public and private universities in Kazakhstan that offer journalism education with the first journalism program in Kazakhstan being introduced in 1934 at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (KazNU). These journalism programs are offered generally in Russian, English, Kazakh or a combination of these languages. Outside of formal university programs, journalism training can also be obtained by attending private short-term courses or training and seminars organized by various international and local media organizations. These include International Center, MediaNet Journalism, Training Center “ZhanaZhol,” Kazakhstan’s School of Actors #1 and news anchoring courses from TeleZhuldyz Center. Some international and local media development organizations offer regular trainings on journalism skills, such as Internews Network Kazakhstan, Legal Media Center and others. Some courses are available on a paid basis. However, university journalism programs remain the main educators for

future journalists. Therefore, this study generally focuses on university education.

In the past, limited attention is paid to scholarly examination of journalism education in Kazakhstan and wider Central Asia. One such research that stands out the most is Gross and Kenny (2008), which described challenges and opportunities in journalism programs across Central Asia. Freedman (2007) also examined journalism education in the context of Kyrgyzstan and whether the Tulip Revolution in 2005 brought any changes to journalism education in the country. Skochilo, Toralieva, Freedman and Shafer (2013) analyzed whether the western model of journalism education could be transplanted into Central Asia. In their work, Freedman and Schafer (2012) argued that Soviet curriculum still impairs preparation of future journalists in Kazakhstan in part because of technological changes occurring in society and in the profession. In addition, Nemecek and colleagues Ketterer, Ibrayeva and Los (2011) surveyed Kazakhstani journalism educators and identified that university programs are failing to match the current realities of the industry. Specifically, they emphasized the need to create new curricula to prepare new generation of professionals that will better serve the public.

Other existing literature suggests that some news outlets re-train journalism graduates because freshly graduated journalists are perceived to be poorly trained during their college years. IREX (2019) argued that such poor perception of journalism education has led to the creation of the Alma Mater of Journalism Club, involving heads of journalism departments, practicing journalists and media managers. The goal of the club is to upgrade educational programs in journalism. Curriculum may vary from institution to institution, but many courses generally focus on the impact of journalism on society and some emphasize practical skills such as writing, shooting and editing. Many other reports describe the urgent need to include multimedia reporting in curriculum and develop an ethical approach. This is because there are widespread ethical lapses among journalists, including biased reporting, frequent violations of privacy, plagiarism of each other’s work and unsubstantiated and unsourced accusations or reliance on single source reporting.

The IREX (2019) report noted that traditional universities do not meet actual media market demands. This may be one of the reasons that Kazakhstan’s “Media Alliance” co-founder Arman Shurayev suggested in 2017 the closing of all journalism programs in Kazakhstan except Al-Farabi

Kazakh National University (KazNU). He said university programs are not producing qualified journalists and that journalism skills can be obtained in “real journalism world,” not in classrooms. “For four years of journalism study, we read books only. We had outdated books about how to do interviews, how to write news leads, and about different genres. We studied everything but we did not have practical tasks... There is huge hole in what they learn at university journalism programs and the real professional world. Harshly to say, universities do not teach anything. Graduates come to us and they know nothing. They do not know how to write news articles, they do not know,” said one of the working editors in Kazakhstan.

The media industry generally expects that journalism programs and schools provide young journalists who have the determination to pursue journalism (Joseph, 2004) and that graduates have critical thinking and technological skills. Hannis (2017) argues that schools generally cannot fully satisfy the media industry’s expectations in part because of high costs, such as hiring qualified faculty members and purchasing advanced technologies such as drones for reporting, expensive software and hardware for shooting and editing broadcast, advanced recording studios, and others. It seems impossible to accomplish for most universities in Kazakhstan and elsewhere in Central Asia because they are generally underfunded[□]. In addition, very few Kazakhstan journalism students seem to be interested in pursuing a serious type of journalism such as doing investigative journalism to serve public interests. In their recent research article, Brown and Ibrayeva (2019) argued that Kazakhstan journalism students prefer TV journalism, but a high percentage also prefer the online environment to do journalism. They also concluded that some students choose journalism because of the traveling involved in journalism. Also, dynamic and lively work factors played a role in students’ decision to pursue journalism as a profession, while other students indicated that they study journalism because of potential to influence public affairs and for the opportunity to be creative.

Education may not be the only factor for the perceived poor quality of journalism graduates. Kenny and Gross (2008) argue that journalism may become a victim of economics where journalists receive low salaries. Journalists receive “starvation pay” (Mould & Schuster, 1999, p. 204) that has not changed much. This leads them to act unethically, including reporting paid content as news and others. “Regarding paid stories from politicians and other people, such paid content do not generally have dis-

claimers by news outlets. There are some friends among journalists who are engaged in propaganda works in journalism. They serve certain groups of people, certain groups of politicians,” said one of the working journalists. In its latest report on Kazakhstan media environment, IREX (2019) reported that journalist salaries are falling and that the number of reporters is also decreasing in the media market of Kazakhstan. The report said that the average salary of a journalism graduate is less than 100,000 KZT but it is important to acknowledge that salaries vary greatly depending on the region and financial health of media organizations. Whenever there is low salary for journalists, highly qualified journalists tend to move to other related professions such as public relations or work in international organizations where salaries are much higher. Skochilo and her colleagues (2013) noted that in such context, journalism as a profession is left in the hands of those who could not find jobs elsewhere or in other professions. Most media outlets ignore ethics or violate ethics guidelines, which leads to low trust from people, in turn leading the public to use more social networks as a source of information (IREX, 2019). Given this context of Kazakhstan journalism, this study aims to address the following research question: What substantive changes (if any) do journalism stakeholders see the need to insert in journalism programs in the country?

Methods

To answer the above-mentioned proposed research question, this study employs in-depth interviews with journalism students, full-time working journalists, and editors of various news outlets. The interviews were held between February 2019 and May 2019. The research participants worked for TV, radio, online news outlets, and print news outlets. Interviews lasted about 25-30 minutes on average. The participants included seven male and 17 female participants, with a total of 24. Ages of research participants ranged from 18 to 40 years old. No one under 18 was invited to participate in this research. Interviews were recorded with permission of research participants. Authors utilized convenient and snowball sampling to reach out to research participants. They were recruited by social media announcements via Facebook and through personal networks of authors.

Although some critics may argue that qualitative in-depth interview may be subjective, this study aims toward getting closer to understanding the journalism community’s experiences and understandings of their own professional context. So, the

goal of this research is not to generalize but rather an attempt to understand the views of Kazakhstan journalism stakeholders about the quality of journalism education. The interviews were held in combination of Kazakh and Russian languages as Kazakhstan is a bilingual country. Some interview questions included basic demographic questions as well as detailed questions, for example: (1) How much are future journalists prepared to immediately work in the journalism field? (2) How did you prepare yourself for the profession? (3) Does today's university curriculum meet today's journalism reality? (4) What skills should future journalists have? Other questions were also asked. Exact numbers of questions differed because the varying detail in responses.

Results/Findings

This study explored journalism education in Kazakhstan by interviewing journalists, editors, and students of journalism in the country. Analysis of interviews reveals that students of journalism programs in Kazakhstan have limited specialty courses that could improve their journalistic skills. The majority of respondents said that they are not satisfied with the learning quality of the journalism faculty. They primarily cite two reasons, that the faculty members lack sufficient professional experiences in journalism that affects quality of teaching and learning, and that available textbooks at universities are very old textbooks. Students in general argue that they lack practical experiences during the study years and that universities lack studios, computers, and other essential equipment needed for developing journalistic skills. Editors and working journalists offered similar arguments.

For example, one undergraduate student from Buketov Karaganda State University M. M. said, "I don't like what they [professors] teach us. Not enough practice. A lot of unnecessary items. And I even doubt that after graduating from university I can find a job in my specialty." Another student from a university located in Astana said, "I can say that future journalists are taught incorrectly. A lot of unnecessary items and why ... they do not understand. Practical lesson take place only once a week. To become the best you have to attend [additional] trainings and courses." Further similar opinion was expressed by another respondent of this research. The student is currently studying at a university in Almaty: "To be honest, there are a lot of minuses. But the most important thing is [lack of] practice. Since journalism is a creative profession, I think future practice is more important than practice than theory. Two years of training is enough. Four years

for theory is a lot. I worked at a news site from the first year, then as a SMM-manager, I went to trainings for journalists, now I work in a newspaper."

One female student said, "I started working in journalism when I was studying in sophomore year (second year at the university). The first year passed with adaptation period but beginning second year I already felt bored because the university did not give me knowledge any more. The university did not me new knowledge already by the second year. Of course, we had theories. Of course, we had some practical assignments in some courses. I do not want to say bad things about my university but our university did not provide any basic knowledge of practical journalism." Meanwhile, another student said, "The major problem of our journalism education is that the faculty consists of teaching members who never worked as journalists themselves. They are theorists. This is why unfortunately ... that more and more short-term journalism courses are being offered outside of formal university settings for those who would like to develop their journalistic skills. Some journalists run such small scale businesses by saying, 'Nowhere else you can learn these skillsonly through our courses.'" Another student said, "Time is changing but we still study from Soviet journalism textbooks."

View of Editors and Working Journalists

One of the working journalists with 15 years of experience in profession said, "Today, young journalists come to the [TV] channel very raw [unprepared]. They do not know how to write text and so on. And it was even in our time. For example, we had the subject 'Kitaptanu Negizderi.' **It was not useful to me in life at all.** And there are a lot of such items." An editor currently working for a state TV channel with at least 10 years of experience shared her own opinions. She said, "I think that the Faculty of Journalism does not give specific knowledge for students. They seem to be walking around. Students come to our channel every day to do an internship and learn something. I personally trained 10 students again. All of them were from the universities of [...] and [...]. Students cannot write their thoughts correctly at the very basic level. Not to mention that they don't know how to interview, make stories, or write any journalistic material. And it is sad because students pay a huge amount of money for knowledge. All students go back for courses and trainings. And this is a waste of money."

An editor of Evening News of the Channel One Eurasia shared his opinion. He said, "Different students come to our practice every month. I know

from my great experience that out of 100 students only 1 percent can write and know exactly what they want. All trainees, 95 percent are not prepared for journalism, especially for news. They have very narrow knowledge and skills that are not at all necessary. And we have to teach them everything from the beginning, in this regard, we do not accept young journalists to work.”

A news website editor agreed with above-mentioned views. He said, “In the 1-2 years you need to study general journalism and then divide by economics and business, etc. And I would suggest to open an elective for all universities. To be honest, the journalism department is not managed by journalists but by philology. And unfortunately, these people have never worked as a journalist, and at the moment this is the main problem.” He also added, “Unfortunately, I did not receive a feedback response from university professors. They do not give sufficient feedback citing to the lack of time.” Another editor said, “You may spend five years or six years at a university but in one month in news room you learn more.”

Although some shared positively about journalism education, they still ended up with responses that expressed some dissatisfaction. For example, one journalism student currently doing an internship at a state news outlet said, “All the literature we read from Soviet times. And when you come to practice in any media you understand that you learn ...[that] you do not need it at all. We also have old equipment, and a lot of them have not been working for a long time. If all this changes it would be very cool.” Another student shared, “The disadvantage is the fact that we learn in several languages at once. I believe that a journalist should specifically define for himself his professional language. And many applicants on admission wanted to be Kazakh language journalists and had great potential for this. Knowledge of several languages turned out to be useful, but not for all, because specifically one language was not given due attention.”

What Needs to be Done?

The editor-in-chief of one of the state TV channels said, “When we hire, we primarily look at work experience. It is most important. But if this is a student who has just graduated from a higher institution, respectively, they have no work experience, then we look at their abilities. Can I write the text, whether the plot is built and so on. In general, about 1,000 students graduate from the journalism department every year...But only 10-15 people get a job in their field. There is no need for separate depart-

ment of journalism but journalism courses should be offered...And once again, the most important thing is experience. Higher institutions must enter into contracts with television channels, magazines, and websites and provide students with experience...”

Another suggestion included one from experienced editor and blogger who said, “Now there are a lot of questions: do you really need to study as a journalist? I believe that it is not necessary to spend years on it when you can just learn the courses. Because now I’m looking at students who come after graduating from the journalism department even with red diploma [honorary diploma], but in the end they don’t know anything...Therefore, it is necessary to increase practical exercises. The faculty of journalism is everywhere, even in the medical university in Shymkent. I believe that it is necessary to change the structure of training journalism. From the first course the student must be ‘in the battlefield.’ And we must give students more opportunities. Higher educational institutions should be in close contact with television channels and newspapers and magazines. And TV channels, in turn, should take on work from the first year, give opportunities to students. Secondly, the future of journalists should not only study journalism, but also finance and so on...”

Discussion/Conclusion

Although this study may seem of scholarly concern to only a small group of researchers invested in journalism education in Kazakhstan and wider Central Asia, it should in fact concern for anyone who cares about journalism in a society. This study explored how working journalists, editors and students of journalism perceive journalism education quality in the context of Kazakhstan. This study was important for a number of reasons. This study was undertaken with a heightened concern about the quality of journalism education, including when there was a public call to close all journalism programs at universities in the country. Although he did not single out journalism, the President of Kazakhstan cited that the majority of employers are not satisfied with education quality in the country, suggesting broader concern about the quality of higher education. Understanding journalism students’ and working editors’ attitudes toward journalism education is important knowledge because how journalism teaching is perceived by other stakeholders of journalism community will shape how to upgrade journalism education to better prepare future generations of Kazakhstan journalists.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 24 journalists, editors and students of journalism programs,

the study seeks to understand journalism education through people's own words and experiences. Some findings are in line with other existing studies that argue that students, working journalists and editors have a generally low opinion about journalism studies. They cite that some of the faculty members may have little or no practical experiences themselves in the subjects they teach. Another finding was that universities focus heavily on the theory of journalism and fail to provide hands-on experiences to students (CIMA, 2007). Everyone agrees that "journalism is changing and requires new educational models that value critical and creative thinking skills while providing practical experience and strong links to industry" (Brown & Ibrayeva, 2019, p. 40). This is not a unique situation to Kazakhstan. Toraliyeva offers similar argument in the context of neighboring Kyrgyzstan, where faculty members teaching journalism have backgrounds as historians, linguists, or are from other academic disciplines (Toraliyeva, 2014). It may be explained by the fact that journalism programs historically were included within philological departments that traditionally included areas such as literature, philological studies, Russian and foreign languages (Lukina & Vartanova, 2017).

Practical Implications

As the results showed, journalists in Kazakhstan strongly urge for more practical assignments in courses, more multimedia reporting courses, and an emphasis on practical skills more than theoretical. The major finding of this study that is in line with existing literature is that curriculum should be updated to meet current realities of journalism. It is possible that the current generation of journalism students have higher expectations from journalism programs because they are emerging into a world

of new technologies and the internet. In addition, this is the generation who participate in exchange programs with European and American universities and, upon return, they expect a higher quality of curriculum after being exposed to top university facilities and programs. In essence, as findings strongly suggest, as noted by Claussen (2019), journalism programs need to fix (update) what they are teaching and, in some cases, who is teaching.

The issue of journalism education quality particularly takes on an urgency when the journalism community globally faces many other troubling signs such as growing distrust from the public, fake news, propaganda, and that journalism is weakened already by disruptions to its traditional business model. Media freedom is globally declining to its lowest (Center for International Media Assistance, 2018). In such context, it is important that journalism educators bear some responsibility for improving the standards of teaching journalism in Kazakhstan. It is also important to do so in discussion with various professional stakeholders such as media owners, academic institutions, journalists' unions, and others to pay urgent attention to the quality of professional standards of working journalists and future generations of journalists who will play a vital role in keeping public informed about essential happenings in society so they make informed decisions as citizens.

Limitations

There are several grounds for critique of this study. First, the sample is relatively small and does not include faculty members. A second limitation is that the study relied on the words of journalists and students of journalism programs. It is possible that they may not have been honest in evaluating journalism education programs. Future studies should involve faculty members and expand sampling to involve more research participants.

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