

Sh. Kozhamkulova 

KIMEP University, Almaty, Kazakhstan
e-mail: sholpank@kimep.kz

GLOBAL THEORY, LOCAL REALITY: REVISITING HABERMAS THROUGH THE LENS OF THE KAZAKHSTANI MEDIA CONTEXT

Habermas defines the public sphere as a realm that mediates between society and the state, in which citizens freely and openly communicate issues of general interest to influence their own collective social future through an open democratic process, as outlined in his 1989 version of *The Public Sphere*. Through the sociological analysis of the historical transformation of the public sphere, Habermas sought to identify concrete, «visible» ways for citizens to create a system that would enable them to influence their own future cooperatively through peaceful democracy. This paper revisits the selected arguments of Habermas's public sphere theory to explore how they can be valuable for the analysis of contemporary Kazakhstan's media context. Using the theory of the public sphere as a theoretical lens, and an exploratory case study, along with logical reasoning as a method of inquiry, the author analyzes and discusses how ideas of Habermas's public sphere theory can be productively applied to existing challenges in Kazakhstan. The results of the analysis suggest that the concept of the public sphere has substantial potential as a valuable framework for investigating the current tasks in the media and communication domain of this Central Asian emerging nation.

Keywords: public sphere theory, Habermas, digital media of Kazakhstan, political communication, social movements.

Ш.Б. Қожамқұлова

КИМӘП Университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан
e-mail: sholpank@kimep.kz

Жаһандық теория, жергілікте контекст: Қазақстан медиасын Хабермас идеялары тұрғысынан талдау

Хабермас қоғамдық саланы қоғам мен мемлекет арасындағы дәнекер рөл атқаратын кеңістік ретінде сипаттайты. Онда азаматтар ортақ мұддедегі мәселелерді еркін және ашық талқылап, демократиялық үдеріс арқылы өздерінің ортақ әлеуметтік болашағына ықпал етуге тырысады. Осы анықтама туралы оның 1989 жылғы «Қоғамдық сала» еңбегінде жазылған. Қоғамдық саланың тарихи трансформациясын әлеуметтанулық тұрғыдан талдай отырып, Хабермас азаматтардың өз болашағына бірлесіп, бейбіт демократия арқылы әсер етуге мүмкіндік беретін жүйені қалыптастырудың нақты, «қөрнекі» жолдарын анықтауға үмтүлді. Бұл мақалада Хабермастың қоғамдық сала теориясындағы кейбір маңызды тұжырымдар қайта қаралып, олардың қазіргі Қазақстанның медиа контекстің талдаудағы ықтимал құндылығы зерттеледі. Қоғамдық сала концепциясы теориялық негіз ретінде, ал зерттеу тәсілі ретінде жағдайлық талдау (case study) мен логикалық пайымдау өдісі қолданылды. Автор Хабермас теориясының идеяларын Қазақстанның қазіргі медиа мен коммуникация саласындағы өзекті мәселелерге тиімді қолдану жолдарын талдап, талқылайды. Талдау нәтижелері көрсеткендей, қоғамдық сала тұжырымы Орталық Азияның дамушы мемлекеті болып табылатын Қазақстанның медиа мен коммуникация саласындағы қазіргі мәселелерді зерттеу үшін маңызды әрі құнды теориялық негіз бола алады.

Түйін сөздер: қоғамдық сала теориясы, Хабермас, Қазақстан, дижитал медиа контекст, саяси коммуникация, қоғамдық қозғалыс.

Ш.Б. Кожамкулова

Университет КИМЭП, Алматы, Казахстан
e-mail: sholpank@kimep.kz

Глобальная теория, локальный контекст: как анализировать медиа Казахстана сквозь призму идей Хабермаса

В своей работе 1989 года Ю. Хабермас определил концепцию публичной сферы как область или пространство, существующее между обществом и государством, в котором граждане свободно и открыто коммуницируют или обсуждают текущие вопросы с целью повлиять на свое коллективное общественное будущее через открытый демократический процесс. Через социологический анализ исторической трансформации общественной сферы Ю. Хабермас искал «наглядное» и понятное решение для граждан, которые хотят создать систему, позволяющую им влиять на свое будущее, сообща, через мирные демократические решения. Данная статья обращается к некоторым аргументам теории публичной сферы Хабермаса со следующей целью: исследовать, как данная концепция может быть применена при анализе медиа-контекста современного Казахстана. Используя концепцию публичной сферы как теоретическую рамку, данная работа использует метод тематического исследования (case study) наряду с логическим анализом и рассматривает аспекты, которые могли бы быть полезны при анализе текущих задач, стоящих перед медиасферой данной страны. Результаты анализа позволяют сделать вывод, что идеи публичной сферы имеют существенный потенциал в качестве конструктивной концепции при анализе опыта и проблем, которые Казахстан проживает и преодолевает сегодня.

Ключевые слова: концепция публичной сферы, Хабермас, цифровые медиа Казахстана, политическая коммуникация, общественные движения.

Introduction

Many communication scholars have examined the essence of genuinely transparent and truly democratic political change and identified the vital ingredients under which such changes are possible. Their ideas can serve as valuable tools for understanding how communication can contribute to peaceful political outcomes in which both citizens and states are winners. In this sense, the experience of developed Western democracies offers valuable lessons for Kazakhstan, which is currently going through diverse challenges as an emerging nation. While some theories fail to be productively applied to non-Western contexts, there are cases when Western-born concepts can offer valuable solutions for non-Western nations. Moreover, these global “communication-centric” concepts can offer robust intellectual conversations in analyzing local contexts such as the Kazakhstani media realm. There is a limited number of studies on this research problem, and this paper aims to address this research gap. It applies Habermas’s *public sphere theory* to Kazakhstan’s media context to test whether this theoretical framework can be applied productively to understanding this nation’s current political communication challenges.

The idea of *the public sphere*, originating from the conceptual framework developed by German critical theorist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, has attracted significant research attention. In his

influential book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Habermas explored the structure and function of the “liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere” and analyzed its rise and transformation. He argues that “publicity continues to be an organizational principle of our political order” (Habermas, 1991, p. 4) and notes that successful sociological and retrospective exploration of the concept of *the public sphere*, will allow us not only to gain a clearer understanding of this concept but such exploration also can help us gain “a systematic comprehension of our own society” from the perspective of “publicity.” (Habermas, 1991). This promise of “*understanding our own society*” makes Habermas’s insights particularly attractive and provocative in terms of how we can apply his ideas in the current diverse contexts, in terms of when such applications will be appropriate, and, most importantly, about why we should engage with this concept today.

This paper revisits the selected ideas of Habermas’s public sphere theory to explore how they can be valuable for the analysis of contemporary Kazakhstan’s media context. Using the theory of *the public sphere* as a theoretical lens and an exploratory case study, along with logical reasoning as a method of inquiry, this essay will examine how concepts from Habermas’s public sphere theory can be effectively applied to existing challenges in Kazakhstan’s media and communication realm.

The author aims to build meaningful conceptual bridges between the two distinct thematic research realms – media communication and Central Asian studies – by introducing important scholarly perspectives in a single conversation.

Literature Review

The Public Sphere

The most straightforward part in learning about the concept of *the public sphere* is to capture what Habermas has defined as the public sphere. According to Habermas, the public sphere is a realm that mediates between society and the state, where citizens freely and openly communicate issues of general interest with the aim of influencing their collective social future through an open democratic process (Habermas, 1989).

“By ‘the public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (Habermas, 1989, p.73).

In his view, state authority is not a component of the public sphere, and it does not belong to the public sphere, even if it is “the executor of the political public sphere.” All citizens have access to this public sphere, or to frame it in Habermas’s exact words, “Access is guaranteed to all citizens” (1989, p.73). In this realm, they act as an independent and free public body, and not in their professional capacities, which might be subject to the legal restrictions of the system:

“Then they behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy” (Habermas, 1989, p. 73).

Habermas’s characterization of the public sphere implicitly suggests that freedom of speech and freedom of assembly are the essence and building blocks of truly democratic, transparent political change.

“Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about the matters of general interest” (Habermas, 1989, p. 73).

Furthermore, Habermas notes that for citizens to communicate effectively in a large public body, they must use media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television in the public sphere to spread their ideas and influence those who receive them.

Habermas also, rightly, acknowledged the centrality of the role of communication in the public sphere. In other words, the public sphere cannot exist if the communication does not occur. This is because for Habermas, “knowledge–of the self, of the other, of the world around us—is produced not through individual sense impressions but through communicative interaction” (Pfister, 2018). It is this ingredient of “communication” blended with further action that leads to peaceful political outcomes, and thus, makes a public sphere truly “public” and democratic in the Habermasian sense. In addition, the communication in the context of the public sphere must be civic, meaning that it is directed at solving collective public concerns or problems. It is important to understand that “people” are not automatically considered as “publics” in the context of the theories of the public sphere(s). It is their active citizenship position or active engagement with society’s problems that transforms them into publics (Pfister, 2018). Finally, according to Habermas’s definition of the public sphere, any given social interaction or civic communication must be an ongoing, reiterative, and regular process. And logically, the outcome of this communicative interaction is aimed at formulating a collective public opinion, which in turn must have an impact in the political domain.

Thus, a concept of the public sphere is defined today as “any site where free and open communication steers judgment according to deliberative principles, in contrast to methods of decision making steered by undemocratic forms of power like money or status” (Pfister, 2018). Amazingly, the two seemingly simple words, “the public” and “the sphere,” combined in the concept of the public sphere, contain a complex meaning that Habermas crystallized.

Remarkably, many scholars tend to briefly emphasize the “when” and the “why” contexts of Habermas’s decision to explore the transformation of the *“public sphere.”* As scholars note, his book and the birth of the *public sphere* concept were the culmination of Habermas’s intellectual search for the answers he was seeking to understand the social and political flows that took place in post-war Germany:

“Structural Transformation responded to a number of cultural currents: the post-World War II reckoning with Nazi atrocities, the only quasi-successful imposition of democracy on previously fascist regimes, the rise of student movements in the 1960s, and the growth of technical systems that appeared to defy democratic oversight” (Pfister, 2018, p. 2).

It seems that, alongside many of his intellectual colleagues from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, Habermas was reflecting on the substantial social and political changes that transformed many countries, including Germany, beginning in the early 20th century. However, his reflection, as scholars note, was balanced and well-adjusted, enabling him to find solutions for the challenging social and political scenarios he witnessed. As scholars note, Habermas's intellectual curiosity seemed to be motivated by the central question: why did German society develop political apathy and disinterest in the genuine democratic public deliberation? To find the answers to this central quest and to understand the political and social environment of his time, Habermas investigated the rise, evolution, and dissolution of the bourgeois public sphere. Through the sociological analysis of the historical transformation of *the public sphere*, Habermas was searching for the concrete "visible" routes of how citizens could build a system that would allow them to influence cooperatively their own future through the peaceful democratic path. For him, the bourgeois public sphere seemed to be the most ideal, the most perfect, and the most desired model of the "genuine" *public sphere*.

Transnationalizing Public Sphere

One of the key theoretical revisions of Habermas's ideas was done by Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 1990). She developed the concept of transnational public spheres (Fraser, 2014), which is extremely helpful in developing additional terminology that might be useful in investigations of cross-cultural and cross-national perspectives in media, economics, politics, and communication. "Thanks to an epochal shift in political culture, today's social-justice movements lack a shared understanding of the *substance* of justice" (Fraser, 2009, pp.2-3). She emphasizes that today's movements are so diverse and created by diverse publics that it is impossible to talk about a single justice for all publics. Individuals who are members of one movement could also be members of other publics. One person today may associate himself/herself with multiple publics depending on the essence of each movement's ideology. The individual is a place where all these identities converge and compete. Her ideas help us understand that there is not only a range of diverse publics around the world, but, most importantly, a multiplicity of public spheres.

Fraser interrogates the "efficacy" and "legitimacy" of the public sphere at the global level. Expectedly, she seems to be puzzled by how we should de-

fine the "public" in the transnational public sphere. Are there mechanisms to address the rights of migrants and diasporas? How should the public sphere deal with transnational companies and organizations such as the IMF, WTO, and World Bank? "If economic governance is in the hands of the agencies that are not locatable in Westphalian space, how can it be made accountable to the public opinion?" (Fraser, 2014, p. 23). In other words, she is concerned that today, people and territorial states have less and less power to decide their own destiny. Global warming, the war on terrorism, and migration are among the many challenges that the territorial-based public spheres are unable to solve. The current transnational reality is creating new vulnerabilities for the people around the world. Thus, the question of accountability develops as a focal point in her theorization of the transnational public sphere: who should be responsible and accountable for the outcomes of the global, transnational forces that control our world today? Drawing her arguments on the work of the numerous scholars, Fraser notes that the "electronic, broadband and satellite" communication technologies permit direct transnational communication, evading "state controls" (Fraser, 2014, p.24). These new realities suggest that "communicative infrastructure" is going through a process of "denationalization." The concerns raised by Fraser are timely and important. They guide our thinking in terms of what the ethical, legitimate, possible solutions are for the risks the world community is facing today. It is worth noting that language and culture remain strong factors that impact the quality and quantity of direct transnational communication. Fraser throws numerous important questions and argues that her goal is to encourage a productive intellectual dialogue in this direction.

Methodology: Applying Habermas as an Analytical Lens

This paper explores Habermas's theory of the *public sphere*. It employs a case study, along with logical reasoning, as a method of inquiry to investigate how this theory's ideas can be productively applied to Kazakhstan's media and communication realm today. The methodology involves systematically comparing core concepts from Habermas's public sphere theory with documented characteristics of Kazakhstan's political and media landscape. This structured conceptual mapping clarifies how theoretical ideas translate into the local context.

This method allowed the researcher to build meaningful connections between the two scholarly conversations – Central Asian studies and media communication. Only a handful of works within communication studies specifically explore Kazakhstan. Similarly, a few studies in Central Asian studies examine in depth the media and communication problems of this emerging nation. Thus, this research paper covers an important research gap. The paper aims to explore the following key research question (RQ): *How can Habermas's theory of the public sphere aid in analyzing the current media communication tasks in the reality of an emerging nation, such as Kazakhstan?*

The author engaged with the essential concepts from the theory of the public sphere and examined Kazakhstan's communication realm using them as a guiding lens. The stages of analysis included the following: a) examination of Habermas's key definitions of the public sphere that represent relevance for researching the Kazakhstani communication field; b) analysis of how other Western scholars used the concept of the public sphere in analyzing the global communication challenges; c) analysis of Kazakhstani reality of media and communication using the framework of Habermas's ideas. Interestingly, the Kazakhstani reality revealed many productive research avenues that could be validly analyzed via the public sphere theory.

Such an in-depth analysis of Kazakhstan's context through the theory of the public sphere allows us to gain insights into how arguments from the field of Central Asian studies can be productively integrated into academic conversations exploring Kazakhstan's media and communication domain, and vice versa.

Findings and Discussion

Challenges of the Globalized Public Sphere for Kazakhstan

In 1993, as Kazakhstan and other newly independent Central Asian states sought successful foreign models to follow, Hyman (1993) argued that their governments faced significant political challenges. Kazakhstan chose to pursue a market economy and a democratic way of development. Moreover, that the independence of Central Asian states is fragile. He argued that the citizens of these states were still to sort out their "identity" or "belonging" challenges:

"Central Asians "have gone in a short space of time from belonging to – and, to a considerable

extent, identifying with – a superpower and the world's largest state, to becoming citizens of small, relatively impoverished and vulnerable semi-independent Asian states. Many, even among nationalists who welcome the prospect a full independence from Moscow, feel they have at one bound joined the Third World, and they bitterly resent it" (Hyman, 1993, p. 290).

While Hyman (1993) was mapping different potential scenarios for the social, political, and economic destiny of Central Asia, he argued that among geographically close big foreign influencers, like for example China, India, and Turkey, Russia will remain dominant in the region, because of its already "functioning" cultural presence there. While Hyman argued in 1993 that the change in Central Asia was inevitable and, perhaps, even desirable, he was unsure how this transformation would occur and in what form it would take.

"It is quite natural to speculate about the power of opposition parties, the shadow of militant or 'fundamentalist' Islam in Central Asia, and whether the politically passive majority, especially in the rural areas, may finally enter into the political equation. The big question is, will political change come through evolution or revolution, by a peaceful, guided transition or by sudden and violent change from below?" (Hyman, 1993, p. 304).

Remarkably, back then, in 1993, almost twenty-seven years ago, the scholars were able to accurately identify the key existing vulnerabilities of the social, economic, and political infrastructure of the region. The only challenging aspect for them was accurately predicting which route, road, or path would be the most effective and the most viable for each Central Asian state.

As the history of the post-independence era of Central Asian states demonstrated, the change came in different "shapes" and "colors." In 2005, Kyrgyzstan went through violent so-called Tulip Revolution (Schatz, 2009; Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2015); while Kazakhstan's power transition in 2019, when the first President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev unexpectedly resigned and transferred the presidential power to the next leader of Kazakhstan Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, was framed as a "beige transition" suggesting that it lacked the "vivid" or significant power transformations (Isaacs, 2020).

Scholars O'Beacháin and Kevlihan (2015) note that while all five Central Asian states shared similar initial challenges in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, they have gone different political roads since then. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan

established strong authoritarian states by adapting existing Soviet political recipes for power consolidation. These states also held early elections, which helped their leaders employ the existing power as a foundation to strengthen their positions. Tajikistan went through a cruel civil war and then, while still being “a weak state,” joined the similar authoritarian path of other Central Asian states. The scholars note that Kyrgyzstan, while demonstrating some democratic promise in 2005, later failed to follow successfully the open democratic route because of the increased levels of violence in the “political contestation” in the country. O’Beacháin and Kevlihan argue that despite the arguments of some scholars that such turmoil will allow reaching “a greater state consolidation” and will strengthen “national consciousness,” the political journeys of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan proved the opposite: “Early but flawed attempts at democratization actually led to increased instability and state fragmentation in both cases” (Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2015, p. 496). Thus, the scholars have been left mystified: “Is an imagined democracy more important than actual democracy for nation-building purposes?” (Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2015, p.496). In other words, can it be that democracy is not a successful way of building a strong nation in Central Asia? If so, why?

Habermas’s Public Sphere and Kazakhstani Media Context

Perhaps Habermas’s concept of the public sphere could provide some clues here. It is possible that the citizens of the Central Asian states were traditionally and culturally not well equipped to engage in “horizontal,” in other words, equal-to-equal, communication and interaction in the Habermasian sense. The long-existing cultural traditions of Central Asia could not produce a perfect marriage between these societies and the democratization. Even Kyrgyzstan, with its “comparatively” free press and brief “blooming” of liberalization in 2005, did not move any further since then toward the “desired destination of democracy.” Perhaps, Shafer and Freedman (2009) are on the right path in holding that democracy cannot be easily imported to other cultural, political, and economic contexts. They argue that foreign media trainers in this region often overlook the significance and vitality of the cultural, historical, and religious values that the journalists in Central Asia uphold and protect. They argue that “awakened nationalism,” “traditions of authoritarian rule,” and the legacy of Soviet-era journalism practices are all important variables when analyzing the barriers to building strong civil societies in

this region. They suggest, quoting Jerrold Green’s (1991) insights from his “*USAID’s Democratic Pluralism Initiative: pragmatism or altruism*” paper, that democracy is a vehicle that has hardware (democratic institutions) and software (people who “drive the hardware”).

While “the hardware” could be easily “transported” to any country, “the civic spirit” and “the mental software” of democracy, that is, the people, their attitudes and cultural mentality, cannot be easily influenced by outside intervention. In other words, while we formally “see” these democratic institutions in Central Asia, in reality, they are not serving democratic purposes to nurture civil society, while their “chauffeurs” are still driving according to the previously existing, non-democratic, cultural and traditional rules. Thus, democracy cannot be easily and quickly taught; it must be learned, earned, and experienced. Only then, it could be appreciated, internalized and used as a preferred way of political management.

Western scholars seem to be disappointed that democracy has not materialized as a viable political system in Central Asian states. Both the state-owned and the commercial media failed to serve as effective public spheres for the Kazakhstani citizens. Moreover, many Kazakhstani citizens were politically passive. As some scholars note, the authorities were able to promote the idea of material thriving effectively, and only a few desired political change. Adams and Rustemova (2009) note that Kazakhstani authorities skillfully introduced, through state policies, a future-oriented neo-liberal vision in which individual citizens and families in Kazakhstan prosper economically. “Indeed, in such a system, where politics is dominated by economic ideology, democratization is seen as a threat to the system that Kazakhstan’s technocrats have so carefully set up” (Adams & Rustemova, 2009, p. 1256).

It is general knowledge that the Central Asian republics were culturally distinct from their European counterparts within the Soviet Empire. Surprisingly, Kazakhstan, a country with a Central Asian cultural mentality, appears to be governed by values that echo Confucian philosophy regarding social hierarchy. As Yin (2008) notes, “Western societies are democratic and horizontal, emphasizing public participation in the government, while Confucian societies are hierarchical and vertical, believing in meritocracy instead of democracy” (Yin, 2008, p.43). While Kazakhstani society is not Confucian, this analogy is used to illustrate symbolic similarity,

and its mentality could be best described as a blend of eastern and western values.

“The ideal Confucian officials are people with “inner sagehood and outer kingliness.” Equality in human relations is a foreign concept in Confucian thinking as he decreed three sets of subservient relationships: subjects should obey their kings, sons should obey their fathers, and wives should obey their husbands. Confucius was not a democrat as some Confucian scholars tend to believe” (Yin, 2008, p.43).

Yin argues that in traditional ancient China, only top intellectuals, after competitive examinations, were promoted to become government officials. This emphasizes that governmental officials in the traditional Confucian cultures were regarded as highly responsible and “worthy leaders.” She notes that Confucian learning implied being skillful in “statecraft.” This feature makes Habermas’s Eurocentric model of the public sphere less relevant in traditionally Asian or Eastern societies. Interestingly, Kazakhstan appears to be shifting between Western and Eastern values. Niyazbekov (2018) argues that Kazakhstani civil society has been quite active since 1991, despite widespread knowledge that citizens of Kazakhstan are politically apathetic. His content analysis revealed that the number of social movements in Kazakhstan had been increasing since 1991. His interview informants confessed that government officials easily approved their “protest permission” paper requests under one condition: the protesters must not criticize the president or his family. Interestingly, most social movements were addressing socioeconomic grievances. In cases where the government responded promptly to satisfy the protesters’ demands, the movements never developed into political ones. The exception was the Zhanaozen protests, which the authorities overlooked, considering events prior to 2020. As a result, the demands of oil strikers transformed into highly politicized ones as the protesters were demanding the nationalization of oil resources. As a result, the state suppressed the Zhanaozen mobilization (Niyazbekov, 2018). It seems that the authorities in Kazakhstan expect citizens to show respect for the state’s performance and service, which is indicative of adherence to Confucian values. In contrast, the Kazakhstani public prefers to adopt Western “democratic” ways of addressing the challenges they face. Thus, we can see some shifts in the “cultural” thinking of citizens in their attitudes toward the benefits of democratization: the Kazakhstani public “can” protest when needed. Of course,

the most recent protests, known as Bloody January 2022 in Almaty, added new layers to this important discussion, and the selected scholars have already initiated this line of inquiry (Ibadildin & Primiano, 2024). However, this research subject needs its own separate in-depth analysis in a separate study.

Returning to our main conversation, we can note that some Kazakhstani scholars sometimes regard state control as a positive thing. For example, the argument that the media is controlled to maintain social stability is evident in Bissenova’s (2012) investigation of Astana’s urban space and social dynamics. She argues that citizens of Kazakhstan welcome and accept the idea of state regulation because they desire this control as a measure of gaining stable development within the country, given that we live in an age of uncertainties: climate change, global economic turbulences, and political instabilities around the world.

For example, Bissenova (2012) describes the citizens of Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, as active “publics” in the sense of Habermas. She argues that these publics meet the requirements of the public sphere definition: they actively engage, communicate, and collaborate to solve common problems, and thus influence the political transactions on their own “local” level. Shklovski and Valtysson (2012) analyze the Kazakhstani Internet portal “Tsentr Tyazhesti” using the theory of the public sphere. Specifically, they investigate three groups: a soap-making community, an automobile-centered community, and a community involved in charity work. The authors argue that, despite limited freedom of speech in Kazakhstan, citizens manage to engage in politics through their communicative interactions. They are just doing it “secretly” (Shklovski & Valtysson, 2012).

The multiplicity of public spheres and the range of different publics within Kazakhstani society make it a perfect case for investigation from the Habermasian perspective of the public sphere. Niyazbekov (2018) argues that, so far, Kazakhstan has been immune to the so-called “color revolutions” because the government has created a strong system to prevent the politicization of citizens’ socio-economic demands. However, he argues, the social movements need to reconsider their tactics if they want to be stronger.

My stance on the possibility of a transnational public sphere is characterized by mixed feelings. On the one hand, Kazakhstan is not yet prepared to address the vulnerabilities that this global reality is bringing. On the other hand, this new ecol-

ogy of globality presents good opportunities for the Kazakhstani public to amplify their voices in the global arena. The Kazakhstani government is attempting to respond to global forces by launching the Children's "*Balapan*" ("Chick") Television Channel, which broadcasts in Kazakh. Kazakhstan also introduced the Latinization project, which is planned to be implemented in the near future. The state is carefully monitoring digital media and networks in Kazakhstan (Anceschi, 2015). However, it is not yet clear whether those measures will help protect Kazakhstani citizens from the risks that transnational forces are increasingly creating. While the public sphere, as a baby born in the Western democracies, might promote the "survival of the fittest," the preferred solution should be the "survival of all cultures" and "publics" in this globalized new universe. This means the world should strive to find a balance between accommodating diverse cultural values and traditions. The growing influence of transnational companies such as Google, Facebook, and Microsoft is evident. The questions of accountability and responsibility posed by Fraser are vital for Kazakhstan's social, economic, and political survival. Nickelodeonization of Kazakh kids, global digital surveillance, e-commerce, and e-government are the scenarios that Kazakhstani citizens are witnessing today.

The rise of tech companies, the emergence of alternative channels of communication, and the new digital dynamics of social interactions all make revisiting key arguments of the public sphere urgent, relevant, and important. Using the concepts of the public sphere, we can examine empirical cases of how various publics used place and space to achieve their political objectives. The public spheres help answer questions as "How should we interpret the global international arena?" Additionally, the public sphere enables us to think about physical and digital borders between the private and public spheres and how these borders have become increasingly invisible in the digital world. Since controlling digital borders has become challenging and cumbersome, the tech companies are heavily pressured these days to be transparent about how they use private and public data. It is also interesting to explore how states strategically exploit the absence of digital borders to advance their own strategic goals, or how they can employ and exploit the transparency of the spaces between different public spheres in their own interests. While scholars actively critique the concept of the public sphere, many seem to agree that the insights of this theory help sharpen our under-

standing of what holds society together or how we make sense of our differences today.

Conclusion and recommendations

Theories of the public sphere(s) can enrich investigations into communication and journalism by providing rich theoretical and empirical data. Since its first introduction, the public sphere(s) have evolved, developed, and emerged as the most elaborated field of study by attracting scholars from diverse disciplines (Pfister, 2018) and areas including political science, sociology, rhetoric, persuasion, argumentation, global studies, citizen activism, digital studies, etc. As a result, each discipline advanced this theory by further adopting and adjusting its key concepts. Communication and journalism studies can leverage these findings and synthesize the diverse arguments in their own research.

The concepts developed within the scholarly discourse of public spheres can offer helpful directions in the investigation of communication and journalism by generating questions such as: What publics do news media serve? Why do news media sometimes fail to provide a voice to the voiceless? Who are counterpublics in each political system (democratic and authoritarian), and how can the news media be inclusive to become an idealized version of the public sphere? How can counterpublics use and abuse the news media? What are the vulnerabilities of the media and communication systems in different countries? Theories of the public sphere can serve as an excellent starting point for addressing these questions.

Public spheres help us analyze journalism, media, and communication from the private/public perspective. Public spheres are fruitful concepts for understanding "how something private becomes public" or "something public becomes private." For example, the public lives of people, documented and curated on social media, become commodities for the private companies that offer those platforms. The content that individuals publish on their social media pages can be both private and public at the same time. The fact that people expose their lives in digital spaces by writing about themselves does not make this text private, because the digital platform is not considered a private space; it is owned by transnational tech companies that may sell users' private information to advertisers. Alternatively, the complex interaction between private and public can be explored in the context of rape (Rogness, 2017) and domestic violence. In this sense, the concept of

the public sphere is expanded and adapted to investigate feminist perspectives.

Exploring whether a newspaper's content or a TV channel's content can qualify as the public sphere in Habermas's sense represents another "thinking" perspective. Are newspapers public spheres or just public spaces? What is the difference between the space and the sphere? How can this nuanced clarification affect our arguments? Theories of public spheres offer some ready-made recipes for addressing these dilemmas.

One practical solution in this realm, based on the findings of the current analysis of Kazakhstan's context and the theory of the public sphere, is to explore the option of creating independent online discussion platforms or transparent forums where Kazakhstani society can openly discuss public issues. These fo-

rum could be run by universities or civil society groups, making sure the space is fair, transparent, and open to everyone. This would help citizens share ideas freely without depending only on state-controlled or commercial media.

Theories of the public sphere are an excellent tool in comparative studies. We can compare not only different public spheres within one state but also compare similar publics in different political, cultural, and economic contexts. They are excellent tools for analyzing the field of communication in the context of global and local social movements (Tufekci, 2013; Papacharissi, 2016) and globalization (Sreberny, 2006). Thus, the key concepts of this theory offer essential insights for analyzing power relations within communities, societies, and states globally and locally.

References

Adams, L. L., & Rustemova, A. (2009). Mass Spectacle and Styles of Governmentality in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61(7), 1249–1276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130903068798>

Anceschi, L. (2015). The persistence of media control under consolidated authoritarianism: containing Kazakhstan's digital media. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 23(3), 277–295.

Bissenova, A. (2012). *Post-socialist dreamworlds: housing boom and urban development in Kazakhstan* [Doctoral dissertation, Cornell University]. Cornell University Library eCommons. <https://hdl.handle.net/1813/29225>

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>

Fraser, N. (2009). *Scales of justice: Reimagining political space in a globalizing world*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/fras14680>

Fraser, N. (2014). Transnationalizing the public sphere: On the legitimacy and efficacy of public opinion in a post-Westphalian world. In K. Nash (Eds.) *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere* (pp. 8–42). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Habermas, J. (1989). The public sphere: An encyclopedia article. In S.E. Bronner & D. M. Kellner (Eds.), *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* (pp. 136–144). New York: Routledge.

Habermas, J. (1991). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hyman, A. (1993). Moving out of Moscow's orbit: The outlook for Central Asia. *International Affairs*, 69(2), 289–304. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2621595>

Iabdildin, N., & Primiano, C. (2024). Understanding 'Bloody January' 2022: A 'limited access order' in Kazakhstan. *Asian Affairs*, 55(4), 623–647. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2024.2427371>

Isaacs, R. (2020). Russia-Kazakhstan relations and the Tokayev-Nazarbayev tandem. *Russian Analytical Digest*, (248), 2–5. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000401980>

Niyazbekov, N. (2018). Is Kazakhstan immune to color revolutions? The Social Movements Perspective. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 26(3), 401–425.

O'Beacháin, D., & Kevlihan, R. (2015). Imagined democracy? Nation-building and elections in Central Asia. *Nationalities Papers*, 43(3), 495–513. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.916662>

Rogness, K. (2017). (Re)turning to the private sphere. In C. R. Foust, A. Pason, & K.Z. Rogness. (Eds.), *What democracy looks like: The rhetoric of social movements and counter publics* (pp. 152–174). Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

Papacharissi, Z. (2016). Affective publics and structures of storytelling: Sentiment, events and mediality. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(3), 307–324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1109697>

Pfister, D. (2018, September 26). Public Sphere (s), Publics, and Counterpublics. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. Retrieved 7 Sept. 2025, from <https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-562>.

Shafer, R., & Freedman, E. (2009). Press constraints as obstacles to establishing civil societies in Central Asia: Developing a new model of analysis. *Journalism Studies*, 10(6), 851–869. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700903119917>

Schatz, E. (2009). The soft authoritarian tool kit: Agenda-setting power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. *Comparative Politics*, 41(2), 203–222. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40599210>

Shklovski, I., & Valtysson, B. (2012). Secretly political: Civic engagement in online publics in Kazakhstan. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(3), 417–433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.705196>

Sreberny, A. (2006). The global and the local in international communications. In M. G. Durham & D.M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks* (pp. 604–625). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Tufekci, Z. (2013). “Not this one” social movements, the attention economy, and microcelebrity networked activism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57(7), 848–870. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479369> (Original work published 2013)

Yin, J. (2008). Beyond the four theories of the press: A new model for the Asian and the world press. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 10(1), 3–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/152263790801000101>

Information about author:

Шолпан Кожамкулова – PhD, Assistant Professor of the Department of Media and Communications of the College of Social Sciences at KIMEP University (Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: sholpank@kimep.kz).

Автор туралы мәлімет:

Шолпан Кожамкулова – PhD, асистент-профессор, медиа және коммуникациялар кафедрасы, әлеуметтік ғылымдар факультеті, КИМӘП Университеті (Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: sholpank@kimep.kz).

Сведения об авторе:

Шолпан Кожамкулова – PhD, асистент-профессор, кафедра медиа и коммуникаций, факультет социальных наук, Университет КИМЭП (Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: sholpank@kimep.kz).

Received: October 3, 2025

Accepted: December 7, 2025