

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND CENTRAL ASIA
Crisis Management, Economic Impact, and
Social Transformations

Marlene Laruelle, editor

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COVID-19 Pandemic and Central Asia sheds new light on the consequences of the pandemic on Central Asian countries by giving voice to diverse experts around the world. Chapters focus on the social, political, economic, and geopolitical impacts of COVID-19 and its dramatic effects on the region. The pandemic has exposed major flaws in healthcare and economic systems around the world, and Central Asia is no exception. The region's countries have been hit by a plunge in oil prices and lower demand for their export commodities; local labor markets and migrants' opportunities abroad have been disrupted, and prospects for investment and tourism have been reduced. Public health and educational networks lack the resources to extend into rural areas, and authorities are using digital tools to increase control over the population. At the same time, increasing tensions between the U.S. and China may jeopardize the hopes of Central Asians for the region to serve as a transit hub amidst a prosperous Eurasia.

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INFORMING THE PUBLIC ABOUT THE DANGERS OF A PANDEMIC. EARLY COVID-19 COVERAGE BY NEWS ORGANIZATIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN



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In Kazakhstan, news of the COVID-19 pandemic was greeted with alarm. The government was concerned with protecting public health and information security to prevent panic and unrest. Bloggers with social networks, as well as ordinary citizens using the Internet, became media sources themselves. To suppress rumors and so-called provocative information, the government created two Centers: one for Coordination and Centralization of the Media Work and one for COVID-19 Monitoring and Accounting. However, the main burden of informing the public fell to the professionals of the “pen and microphone.”

During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March to August 2020), Kazakhstani journalists acutely felt the power, pressure, and control of the authorities as they attempted to obtain and disseminate accurate information. This study used a survey of print, online, radio, and television editors, followed by structured in-depth interviews with chief editors, to explore how national and local news organizations have worked to inform the public about COVID-19 and to combat fake news and misinformation. The results show that journalists faced obstacles in receiving credible and accurate information from government and medical officials and that they engaged in self-censorship.



Journalists from traditional and new media in Kazakhstan, like their colleagues in other countries, confronted a new global challenge in 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic. This topic has shaped the agenda for much of the year as the news media responded to the pressing need to understand and explain a force majeure situation for readers, viewers, and listeners. Covering the issue has become a priority for most domestic media outlets in Kazakhstan. Since the beginning of the pandemic, each news organization has developed its own approach to data collection and processing, as well as the dissemination of relevant information. For example, a number of media outlets chose to transmit only official statistics on coronavirus cases and deaths. Some decided not to cover the topic in general, citing the fact that they specialize in other types of stories.

A paradox arises here. On the one hand, traditional media should cover all relevant topics; on the other hand, they have the right to choose topics that, in their opinion, are more interesting to, or important for, their audiences. In setting their daily agenda, the choice of what to report was largely associated with the reputation of each journalistic organization, at least for leaders of most traditional media outlets that adhere to this principle. The reality that journalistic work takes place under conditions of risk and crisis did not change that basic, uniform professional principle of journalistic autonomy, even as media organizations made significant changes in production and organization (Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger 2017). Meanwhile, travel restrictions prevented journalists from actively moving around their cities to do reporting and increased their reliance on online reporting. Free training webinars for journalists were launched en masse and focused on coverage of COVID (Lee and Bottomley 2010).

Researchers describe “crisis” as a kind of transitional state that can arise based on an accident (Fearn-Banks 2017), unstable government (Fink 2002), or damage (Coombs 2018). Models of media behavior depend on the attitude of news organizations and journalists toward a crisis (Vakurova 2015). A news outlet’s reputation in the eyes of the public and government depends on how its journalists perform in such a difficult period. Therefore, it is useful to examine the work of journalists and media executives during the pandemic from the perspective of a communication crisis.

For the media, any crisis is an opportunity to provide information, because public-facing crisis coverage is a professional responsibility of journalists. The media are traditionally considered a bridge between government and the people, yet both parties have different views on any given crisis situation. The more accurate, transparent, and complete journalistic coverage of the situation is, the greater will be the trust afforded to the journalistic organization (and therefore also its reputation) in the public’s eyes. The new global challenge in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic shows how severely nations are divided in terms of information and communication, and how journalists find themselves at the epicenter of this division.

In Kazakhstan, the boundaries of the information vacuum began to expand from the first days of the pandemic. Media organizations had to make many efforts to provide important information to different segments of society as members of the public felt completely at a loss about the scope of the situation and what to do about it. This was a period of information starvation as government officials intentionally refused to fully disclose what they knew about the virus and about how the government, medical professionals, and the pharmaceutical industry could respond. The government established two Centers for Coordination and Centralization of the Media Work and for COVID-19 Monitoring and Accounting to coordinate and centralize the work of the media,

maintain social stability, combat fake news and misinformation and monitor and register COVID-19 patients. It also established the coronavirus2020.kz website as an official source of reliable and verified information.

The first four official cases of COVID-19 infection were registered in Kazakhstan on March 13, 2020. As of September 9, 2020, there were 106,498 cases, including 1,634 deaths (Coronavirus2020.kz 2020). These numbers continue to rise. Kazakhstanis initially underestimated the danger (Bisam.kz 2020). In addition, the lack of reliable information about the coronavirus and reassuring professional risk assessments from medical experts spread the false belief that the threat was exaggerated.

Given the powerful influence on editorial policies that investors and government agencies wield (as they finance the media in Kazakhstan), it was extremely difficult for journalists to fully cover the pandemic amid quarantine restrictions (Internews.kz 2019). That is why only dry statistics appeared on TV screens and why criticism of the government appeared only occasionally in newspaper articles and on the Internet.

Brief Overview of the Media in Kazakhstan

As of January 10, 2020, Kazakhstan had 3,669 registered media outlets: 2,964 periodicals, 161 television channels, 73 radio stations, and 471 news agencies and online publications. The most numerous are print media with 1,859 newspapers and 1,105 magazines. Most are published in Kazakh or Russian, with 1,348 being only in Russian and 882 only in Kazakh. The remainder appear in other languages or in three or more languages (Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2020). The four largest-circulating newspapers are Karavan and Karavan-Class (partly private, in Russian, weekly, combined circulation 500,000); Yegemen Qazaqstan (state-owned, in Kazakh, five times weekly, circulation 201,750); Kazakhstanskaya Pravda (state-owned, in Russian, five times weekly, circulation 100,000); and Ekspress-K (partly private, in Russian, five times weekly, circulation 100,000). The top four TV channels are 1 Channel Eurasia, NTK, KTK, and 31 Channel. The most-used news agencies are Today Kazakhstan, KazInform, Bnews, Business Resource, and Interfax-Kazakhstan (International Research & Exchanges Board 2019, 236).

According to the authorities, 90% of the media outlets are private, and under the law, the state has no right to interfere in their activities or editorial policies (Official Information Resource of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2019). Yet, over the past three years, Kazakhstan has moved up only by one spot in the international ranking of freedom of the press issued by the nongovernmental organization Reporters without Borders. Among 180 countries, Kazakhstan moved from 158th in 2018 and 2019 to 157th in 2020 (Reporters without Borders 2020). However, the authorities dispute the rating, asserting that it does not reflect the real picture of press freedom in the country (Liter.kz 2020).

Research Question and Methods

In such a context, how did domestic news media inform Kazakh society during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic? During the six-month study period from March through August 2020, the heads of newspapers, TV companies, news agencies, and online media faced the responsibility

of creating an atmosphere of trust among the state and society, journalists, and audiences. Simultaneously, social media content creators, bloggers, and civic activists were grabbing attention with their own agendas, which were dominated by emotion.

The authors of this study chose the survey method and in-depth interviews as the most effective means of researching the question under the conditions of quarantine restrictions. They first sent about 200 surveys to editorial and personal Internet addresses of journalists and media executives in all regions of the country and received 75 responses. The survey (provided in both Kazakh and Russian) had 19 questions. Seven were open-ended questions involving detailed written answers; twelve were closed-ended questions.

As a follow-up to the survey, the authors subsequently conducted in-depth telephone interviews with the heads of five traditional and online media outlets about their journalistic priorities in informing Kazakhstan's society and about their selection of news sources.

Findings

Survey questions were divided into four thematic parts: Part 1: General information about the respondent; Part 2: News priorities of the respondent's editorial office, TV channel, news agency, or online media; Part 3: Reporting methods; Part 4: Impact on news policy from the editorial office, TV channel, news agency, or online media organization. Among the 75 respondents, 41.33% answered in Kazakh and 58.66% answered in Russian. The largest number of respondents were journalists working at newspapers (see Table 1).

Table 1: Survey Respondents' News Organizations

№	Type of media	% of respondents
1	Newspapers	44%
2	News agencies	12%
3	Television	17.33%
4	Online media	25.33%
	Survey respondents	N=75

Most respondents reported that they work in private media (68%); only 29.33% work in state media. One-fifth (21.33%) have more than ten years of work experience in a news organization, a third (32%) have from four to nine years of experience, and the remainder (42.66%) are less-experienced journalists with fewer than three years in the profession. Respondents included chief editors, staff editors, correspondents, and producers, including members of editorial boards and individual journalists.

Asked about the news priorities of their editorial office, respondents in both language groups and all types of media provided similar responses. They said providing health information to the public and presenting government positions and statements were high priorities. However, Russian-language media more often relied on international sources, while Kazakh-language journalists said they trusted information from local authorities more. Russian-language editors focused more often than Kazakh editors on the pandemic's negative impact on citizens' economic situation. Table 2 (Russian-language newsrooms) and Table 3 (Kazakh-language newsrooms) show the differences in the respondents' choice of news sources.

Table 2: Priorities of the Editorial Office (Russian-Language Newsrooms)

№		High priority	Some priority	Not a priority
1	Economic impact of the pandemic on the public	24	16	1
2	Economic impact of the pandemic on the nation	12	18	7
3	Providing health information to the public	29	9	3
4	Presenting government positions and statements	26	12	2
5	Combating misinformation and “fake news”	22	8	7
6	Maintaining advertising revenue and circulation	11	15	11
7	Human impact of the pandemic on the public	20	11	4
8	New research developments for vaccines and/or treatment of COVID-19	19	12	7
9	Protecting the health of its journalists	18	12	6
10	How neighboring countries (Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan) deal with the pandemic	10	12	15
11	Effects of the pandemic on Kazakhstan’s international relations	7	21	8

2b: News Sources Used (Russian-Language Newsrooms)

№	Types of sources	Yes (number of responses)	No (number of responses)
1	Office of the President	24	17
2	Ministry of Healthcare	35	7
3	Members of Parliament	19	20
4	Regional and local health officials	37	6
5	Regional and local political officials (governor, akim, etc.)	34	5
6	World Health Organization	31	8
7	Medical researchers in Kazakhstan	27	11
8	Health care providers (doctors, hospitals, nurses, etc.) in Kazakhstan	35	7
9	Other specialists (economists, political scientists, etc.)	27	12
10	International news organizations of Russia, Europe, U.S., etc.	25	13
11	NGOs (Kazakhstan)	27	13

12	NGOs (international)	12	24
13	Ordinary citizens	28	13
14	Other types of news sources	23	13

Table 3: Priorities of the Editorial Office (Kazakh-Language Newsrooms)

№		High priority	Some priority	Not a priority
1	Economic impact of the pandemic on the public	12	14	3
2	Economic impact of the pandemic on the nation	8	11	9
3	Providing health information to the public	24	6	1
4	Presenting government positions and statements	16	11	2
5	Combating misinformation and “fake news”	12	15	2
6	Maintaining advertising revenue and circulation	4	12	12
7	Human impact of the pandemic on the public	15	14	1
8	New research developments for vaccines and/or treatment of COVID-19	11	12	6
9	Protecting the health of its journalists	14	8	7
10	How neighboring countries (Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan) deal with the pandemic	10	12	6
11	Effects of the pandemic on Kazakhstan’s international relations	13	10	6

3b: News Sources Used (Kazakh-Language Newsrooms)

№	Types of sources	Yes (number of responses)	No (number of responses)
1	Office of the President	12	16
2	Ministry of Healthcare	27	1
3	Members of Parliament	13	14
4	Regional and local health officials	26	2
5	Regional and local political officials (governor, akim, etc.)	23	5
6	World Health Organization	23	6
7	Medical researchers in Kazakhstan	21	8
8	Health care providers (doctors, hospitals, nurses, etc.) in Kazakhstan	26	3
9	Other specialists (economists, political scientists, etc.)	20	8
10	International news organizations of Russia, Europe, U.S., etc.	14	13
11	NGOs (Kazakhstan)	12	15
12	NGOs (international)	7	19
13	Ordinary citizens	20	8
14	Other types of news sources	23	4

There was a clear difference in main news sources used according to language. That difference is especially important for an audience that lacks access to the Russian segment of the news realm. Sometimes rumors spread about the alleged artificiality of the coronavirus problem and its far-fetchedness, giving rise to a frivolous attitude toward the dangers of the spreading infection. Thus, the Kazakh-speaking population continued to celebrate weddings, birthdays, and anniversaries more than the Russian-speaking citizenry. As a result, many people died due to untimely information or misunderstandings of the importance of following the rules.

Self-censorship is a powerful constraint on independent, ethical journalism in Kazakhstan (Kurambayev and Freedman 2019). The term refers to individual journalists' and news organizations' practice of not covering certain news topics, or not publishing or broadcasting certain stories, for fear of angering government authorities or advertisers (Junisbai 2011). Slightly more than 60% of respondents from both language groups reported that they had not experienced self-censorship, while about 40% answered that they had carried out self-censorship (see Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4: Was There Self-Censorship in Russian-Language News Media?

	Yes	No
Have you seen self-censorship of individual journalists and/or news organizations in their coverage of the pandemic?	38.6%	61.4%

Table 5: Was There Self-Censorship in Kazakh-Language News Media?

	Yes	No
Have you seen self-censorship of individual journalists and/or news organizations in their coverage of the pandemic?	37.9%	62.1%

In general, media representatives believe Kazakhstani news media should provide more coverage of the pandemic to better inform the public of its economic impact, impact on education and schools, and consequences for the quality of medical care. The authors believe that these reasons partly reflect that many people lost income due to the pandemic, and not all regions and not all families of schoolchildren were ready for the distance learning format. For example, remote villages either had no Internet or their signal was weak, which hindered the administration of online classes; in addition, not all children had computers. A separate point is the quality of medical care, given (for instance) a shortage of drugs.

During the study period, Kazakhstani media dealt with “fake news” about the pandemic, mainly via Facebook and other social networks. For example, some media outlets wrote that one should not believe rumors that a helicopter was flying over Almaty, the country’s largest city, and spraying coronavirus. There were even fake reports from doctors who contributed to the panic through social networks. On the other hand, some doctors were supporters of the press and actively blogged, openly criticizing the power structures of health administration at the city and national levels. However, their voices could not always be heard by the authorities.

As Tables 6 and 7 show, responses about fake news were very similar in both languages.

Table 6: Answers of Russian-Language Media about “Fake News”

	Yes	No
Did your editorial office, TV channel, news agency, or online media outlet receive any misinformation or “fake news” about the pandemic?	30.2%	69.8%
If yes, was this information received from:		
	Yes (number of responses)	No (number of responses)
Twitter	2	15

LiveJournal	2	14
Facebook	9	9
TikTok	2	14
Other social media sites	10	8
Telephone calls	5	11
Press releases	3	14
Press conferences	5	12
Emails	4	14
Other	4	11

Table 7: Answers of Kazakh-Language Media about “Fake News”

Did your editorial office, TV channel, news agency, or online media outlet receive any misinformation or “fake news” about the pandemic?	33.3%	66.7%
If yes, was this information received from:		
	Yes (number of responses)	No (number of responses)
Twitter	2	10
LiveJournal	1	11
Facebook	9	6
TikTok	3	9
Other social media sites	8	7
Telephone calls	6	7
Press releases	3	10
Press conferences	3	9
Emails	2	10
Other	4	8

In their survey responses, journalists reported that various difficulties thwarted their ability to obtain official information. During press conferences, for example, officials answered questions that came in advance, did not answer urgent questions raised during the press conferences, and sometimes ignored questions. In the end, the material published in the outlets’ stories was not always exclusive, and newsrooms repeated each other’s reports. Journalists did demonstrate civic and professional responsibility by using social networks to protest and criticize restrictions on obtaining information from the specially created press centers of the Ministry of Healthcare.

Outlets were further hampered by the country’s lack of journalists specializing in medical topics, so it was difficult for reporters to understand and accurately explain the specifics of treatment protocols offered by Kazakh, Russian, Japanese, and European doctors. Similarly, there was confusion about the drugs being used, including which were effective and which were harmful.

Many citizens flocked to news on the Internet and social media, and there was strong competition between professional journalists and bloggers, who also defended their status in the information field. As a result, inaccurate information from the Internet was sometimes incorporated into stories by professional journalists.

In-Depth Interview Results

Five chief editors were interviewed in depth to provide a qualitative picture of the situation to help the authors analyze the problems and identify new aspects of pandemic-related coverage. Table 8 provides background information about them. They were selected based on the popularity and circulation of their publications. The authors of the study believe that the five experts working in the same area of interest are a sufficient sample size for in-depth interviews in this qualitative study. Two respondents represented a state publication or a publication financed by a regional executive body; the others were from private media outlets (newspapers, a magazine, and online media) with high circulation and fairly wide audience coverage, publishing both traditionally and online.

Table 8. Background on Chief Editors Interviewed

	Position	Description of news organization	Ownership of news organization	Total circulation (copies)
Leader 1	Deputy chairman of the board & chief editor	National republican newspaper	State	More than 185,000
Leader 2	Chief editor	Social and political newspaper	Private	More than 130,000
Leader 3	Chief editor	City newspaper	State	34,000
Leader 4	Chief editor	Educational magazine for children and adolescents	Private	10,000
Leader 5	Director & chief editor	Internet edition	Private	N/A

The authors chose to interview print editors because print media have been the most negatively affected by restrictive quarantine measures compared to other media. Interviews took place by phone and were recorded for transcription using Audacity, the multi-platform audio editor. Each interview lasted from 25 to 40 minutes.

All interviewees agreed that the pandemic had become a priority editorial topic. At the same time, one chief editor emphasized that “the topics that the newspaper traditionally covers, and this is the fight against corruption, shortcomings in the work in law enforcement agencies, and so on, of course, remained.” Another chief editor said the staff “looked for comments on everything. This also applied to the work of medical workers, their professional training, their support and compensation for their dangerous work during a pandemic, the quality of their work and the quality of service for the sick, the condition of the sick, treatment, plus problems with the provision of medical supplies and medicines.”

The interviewees said in-depth articles had gained particular importance since the beginning of the pandemic and their journalists sought to provide readers with detailed accounts of the causes and consequences of the problems. As one interviewee explained:

Since the beginning of the pandemic, this issue has become even more relevant since people trust the information published in the newspaper. It is difficult to predict the consequences of incorrect statements and questionable advice. Therefore, our main principle is to avoid misleading facts and doubtful opinions in the newspaper [and] rely only on the opinion of qualified specialists, doctors, and scientists.

Interviewees from state media said they received no direct orders from officials about how to cover the pandemic. “We have not received any commands from the government,” the chief editor of a privately owned children’s magazine said. “Our magazine consists of 32 pages. We immediately allocated two pages to the pandemic issue. The stories and poems of children sent to the editorial office were sorted and published on the pages dedicated to the coronavirus problem.”

Obtaining Information

All the interviewees acknowledged problems obtaining useful, truthful, and reliable information. In addition, in times of widespread pessimism among the public, the authorities recommended publishing and broadcasting less news about the pandemic and publishing softer and more positive content.

“We did not know about the epidemic that began in December until March, and the Ministry of Healthcare did not understand how to respond. Therefore, we refused to publish the information because we did not have access to it,” one interviewee said. Another said:

The official medical structures, which were supposed to provide as much information as possible on the situation, unfortunately at first did not work well enough to explain the whole situation to people, both about the infection itself and about the protocols and, in general, the work of medical structures. Therefore, all the criticism fell on them, and they rapidly lost confidence.

A chief editor criticized the government’s weakness in communications:

According to the law, you need to apply with an official letter to find out whether the information disseminated is correct or not. First, the request goes to the office, then to the minister. A response will be received in at least three days. This is determined by law—the answer is provided within three to seven days. Now think about it: There is a pandemic on the street, terrible rumors, etc. Who will wait for an official response? Now everyone has smartphones. They shoot what they see. Is anyone going to check this information? No offense, but the state mechanism was not ready for such a situation.

Fake News and Social Networks

According to most interviewees, social networks spread misinformation, which is a troubling reality. “If we compare it as a percentage, then during this time there was only 5% of useful information on social networks. That is, some kind of operational information to which one could really react,” a chief editor said. “The rest was all fake. We never link to social networks and never take information from there. In general, social networks have shown their exceptional destructive role at this moment.” Another strongly worded response: “Of course, there was even the most serious fake news in my opinion, that there is no coronavirus infection at all. That is all a lie. We

were faced with such facts, and of course we tried to explain all this with the help of adequate speakers and specialists.”

One interviewee said the main problem is that traditional media are unable to block the spread of fake news on social networks and instant messaging. The reason lies in the nature of traditional media and the characteristics of social networks. For example, the former have a smaller audience reach than the latter. As one editor explained, “Newspapers are physically late [in arrival] to their readers, and the number of daily visitors to [newspapers’] information sites is not so great. The people are sitting on social networks, video, and text publications.”

News Organization Economics

Asked about the impact of restrictive measures on newsrooms’ economic situation, two interviewees responded that the impact was highly negative. Two others rated the degree of impact as moderately negative. One interviewee said the restrictions did not affect the financial and economic situation of their organization’s editorial operation. The reason for such divergent answers relates to where each chief editor worked. Those reporting high negative effects worked for private newspapers and magazines whose budgets depend on advertising and sponsors. Those who rated it as only a medium negative impact headed state publications or publications financed by the local executive authority. The only interviewee who reported no negative impact heads two privately owned online publications with a small number of employees and a budget reserve.

All the interviewees reported that their editorial offices did not lay off staff. One said that everyone worked remotely at their regular salaries, and some were paid extra, for example, to travel to checkpoints in the first week of the pandemic. That chief editor said, “The pandemic has not affected advertising because the advertising market has not gone anywhere. If the publication is good, then there will be advertising as well.” Another said, “We had money for salaries until September, and we tried to pay. There were no reductions. At the very beginning, after consulting with the staff, I said that if we suffer from the pandemic and cannot pay your salary, then after September you will go on vacation without pay. The employees agreed with this condition.”

There was agreement that the pandemic and quarantine restrictions hurt circulation and distribution of their publications. One cited the government’s “absolutely wrong decision” at the beginning of the pandemic that “print media are among others as a carrier of the virus, although studies have already been known that the virus does not remain on newsprint.” One non-financial consequence of that decision: “Older people, who are more at risk of illness, did not receive newspapers. Together with the volunteers, we donated free newspapers to whom they delivered food packages. Of course, circulation decreased for everyone.”

The closure of kiosks selling newspapers and magazines also hurt. “Retail sales, the so-called live circulation, was for us a certain kind of sign of our relevance among the readers who bought the newspaper,” according to one chief editor. “That is, it is not enough for them to read us in the electronic version on the Internet. Here we have lost about 25,000 newspapers a week.” In addition, publications suffered from the closure of printing houses and delays in transportation. One interviewee said, “In some places the traffic was blocked, it was very difficult to reach them. It was difficult to deliver to the nearest places by mail. Readers called us and asked, ‘Why aren’t your magazines published?’”

Protecting Employee Health

An analysis of the interviews showed that all five media organizations adopted measures and guidelines recommended by the government, represented by the Ministry of Healthcare, to protect the health and safety of journalists. Their main and universal step was moving employees to teleworking. According to the chief editors, only employees who were urgently needed remained in the editorial offices. One chief editor said, “We have introduced a strict regime at the entrance to the office, all the necessary disinfectants and so on. We employ about 100 creative and technical personnel. During this time, only three people were ill with a mild form [of illness] and were [working] at a distance.” However, that chief editor said up to 45% of employees got sick at other news organizations working with an open office system where “everyone sits in the same nest.”

When self-isolation began, journalists at another news organization “worked quite hard, practically seven days a week,” one editor explained. The news organization paid employees more because they were working much more than eight hours a day. However, some had to be in the office, this interviewee explained, “since we are also a print publication that requires typesetting and all the classic traditional efforts,” and the company provided masks and sanitizers and followed “sanitary and hygienic protocols.” Other common health measures included staff meetings on Zoom and sending stories and photos to editors by email. Even so, one interviewee said, “There were times when it was necessary to go outside, for example, to take a photo for the cover with six or seven students. We were all wearing masks and pulled them off for a couple of seconds when we took a photo together.”

In addition to their professional work under difficult logistical, financial, and political conditions, some participated as volunteers in campaigns to financially support and deliver food to needy citizens and to help sick journalists purchase scarce medicine or medical equipment.

Lessons Learned

Some interviewees acknowledged that they would most likely have changed their approach to covering the pandemic if they had known in March what they knew at the end of August. As one participant explained:

In my opinion, it would be possible to switch to informative and useful news. I would take away political information. It would be possible to make videos useful for the population based on international experience. After all, this is not only a pandemic issue, but above all a hygiene problem... In other words, instead of political information, I would offer useful information to the public, be it a video or text.

Another interviewee said the government should have provided full and reliable information to journalists, “who serve as a bridge between the government and the people.” That would have “increased the society’s ability to resist infection. For example, when no one knew how to be treated, people rushed to find traditional and alternative medicines.” Referring to a rumor of a six-week quarantine and rising prices, that chief editor said sellers “took advantage of the situation and increased the prices of ginger, lemon, and other products. At that time, the media should have strengthened contacts with the population and explained how to resist the disease.”

Yet some interviewees defended their early approach in covering the issue. One expressed it this way: “I believe that we covered [it] normally and sufficiently. Everything was as it should be, and [if] there was criticism about drugs, we always published it. I didn’t see any change in the content or quality of colleagues.” Another said, “Nothing has changed in this area... Now I do not have any criticism of what has been done, what could be redone. They were professional problems, they remain and appear every day, and every day you need to react to them and try to do it professionally.”

Conclusion

The results of this study reflect that the pandemic has become a priority topic in the work of Kazakhstani news organizations—and it promises to stay that way for a long time. Lessons learned from journalists’ early coverage may improve their professionalism and responsibility in coverage of future crises. Those lessons may also guide the government toward more transparency and fuller disclosure to the press and the citizenry during this and future crises.

Journalists said domestic media tried to cover the issue from all sides, as far as the information available about the pandemic allowed. Full-fledged coverage with high-quality analysis based on verified information and the opinions of competent experts gained particular importance against the background of rumors and fake news about the coronavirus. Meanwhile, journalists independently chose their sources and the tone of coverage but still experienced problems obtaining useful, accurate, and reliable information. Study participants agreed that social media contributed to the spread of fake information, saying social networks and instant messaging played an extremely destructive role. There was, however, an acknowledgement that social media could be useful in providing an impetus for journalists to search for objective information and refer readers to high-quality news.

An important observation with implications for journalistic coverage of future crises is that traditional media could not stop the spread of fake news through social networks and instant messaging. One major reason why so many citizens turned to social media for information is that traditional media relied on official information that was seriously delayed by the government. The existing mechanism of communication between the state and journalists, respondents said, does not allow the government to promptly provide the public with official news regarding crises.

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