



# Instant Messaging for Journalists and PR-Practitioners: A Study of Four Countries

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**Abstract.** The paper presents the results of an exploratory research of the use of instant messaging in the professional communication of journalists and public relations specialists. The study was conducted in four countries of the Eurasian Economic Union: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. The main method of research was an expert poll. The authors have interviewed 256 experts in the field of journalism and PR. The data were collected in December of 2017. The participating experts had to meet two requirements: to have considerably solid job experience and to use messenger applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook Messenger, Skype, Viber, etc. for professional purposes. The study shows that instant messaging has become an important communication tool for journalists and PR-specialists who choosing to use messengers for reasons of convenience, speed, and privacy.

**Keywords:** Journalism · Public relations · Mobile internet  
Messengers · Internet communication

## 1 Introduction

Modern media continues to change rapidly due to technical factors and especially due to the development of the mobile Internet. Unconditionally, the main gadget of our time is a smartphone. The young persons started the process of migration from computers to mobile gadgets [25]. After that, as it was predicted by M. Castells, new mobile technologies have been rapidly adopted by business and media [7]. In 2016 the number of mobile users exceeded the number of Internet users, and the number of connections to Internet sites from smartphones and tablets around the world exceeded the use of the Internet from computers and

laptops [8]. Here is an unstoppable process of integration of electronic devices into the life of a human being.

The most important trend in the modern media landscape deals with the growing use of instant messaging. Initially, instant messaging services, such as Facebook Messenger, Skype, Telegram, Viber, WhatsApp, etc., were used mainly for the exchange of messages for personal purposes. However, instant messengers have started to act as platforms for the distribution of mass media content [3]. In particular, we are talking about channels and chat-bots in Telegram [17]. Media penetration into this sphere was the result of an adaptation of media to new conditions and going to the place where the audience is located. Studying the processes of optimizing the media system in the context of adapting it to new technological realities is an urgent task of scientific research. Taking into account a large number of works by both domestic and foreign researchers in the field of social media, it should be noted, however, that today there is a lack of works in which the opinion of journalists and public relations specialists about instant messaging was clarified. This work aims to fill this gap.

## 2 Research Background

There are several starting points of our research which one must keep in mind before proceeding to the research design. First of all, our study relies heavily on the previous studies of social media in journalism and PR. On the one hand, there are many publications about networked journalism or web-journalism [11, 12, 18, 21, 26, 28]. They focus on the developments of new forms of journalism such as citizen journalism or web-journalism. Also, they trace the dynamics of the mass media audiences, predicting a decline of printed media. On the other hand, existing special literature about PR usually emphasizes benefits of social media marketing [1, 9, 13, 19, 20, 24]. The main bonus for social media marketing is considered to be the level of engagement with clients and customers. The other important bonus deals with the “electronic word of mouth” which means that social media could be very effective and efficient tool to disseminate information [20].

However, some skeptical voices about risks and eventual costs of social media marketing in PR are almost invisible [2, 27]. In all these publications technical factors dictate an evolution of PR and journalism facilitating the formation of new activities and corrupting existence of old-school journalism and PR. Thus, the Internet, social media, and now messenger applications attract the attention of researchers all around the world. However, there is a research gap in the field of new forms of communications and their applications in mass communication, especially, if we are talking about regional specifications and political/legal limitations across the globe.

The second starting issue deals with the co-evolution of journalism and PR. These two communication professions always influenced each other, but still, there are not so many publications on the issue. For example, in 2016 Schonhagen and Meissner claimed to be the first who produced “the first contribution of its

systematic review” [23]. His historical analysis shows that “PR emerged due to biased reporting or the neglect of certain interests in media coverage” [23, 755]. PR and journalism have always been two sides of the “mass communication coin”. They exchange personal and technologies back and forward, constructing the system of rational social communication.

Schonhagen and Meissner use a historical approach to construct a general theory of PR and journalism development. Due to the high level of abstraction this approach is less useful at the empirical level. Apart from the pioneering study of P. Schonhagen and M. Meissner, however, there are two publications in the topic with empirical research by A. Verchich with colleagues [30, 31]. These publications actually use the approach we would like to apply in our study. Verchich with colleagues conducted two surveys among public relations practitioners and journalists in Serbia and Croatia. They used a membership list of PR and journalists associations in order to collect data. The surveys of 2016 and 2017 have collected opinions of over 600 journalists and PR practitioners about the occupational status and working conditions of the opposite profession. Verchich with colleagues calls this “coorientational research” aimed to explore the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists.

Our study focuses on even less empirical level dealing with one the tools of professional communication - messenger applications. Journalists and PR practitioners have to work on-the-go, so instant communication is a part of their everyday job. We believe that communication studies must include journalism and PR as the most important parts of mass communication in today’s world.

The concluding starting point actualizes the problems of PR and journalism developments in the post-soviet states. This includes common and specific transformations in the media, journalism, PR and propaganda activities. There are many publications on the issue [4, 10, 14, 15, 29]. Mass media and mass communication in post-soviet countries demonstrate high rates of the developments. For example, in Russia they have the impressive size and diversity of the current industry in terms of numbers and their growth rate, especially for advertising, which, during the first decade of the new millennium, has reached the level of the Western industrial countries (typically 1 per cent of the gross domestic product) [29]. Also, it is typical for post-soviet countries to have a situation of hybridization of mass media which became partially print, partially electronic, and partially Internet-media [4]. In terms of Internet penetration these four countries looks quite similar: in 2017 Russia has 76.1% of the population using the Internet, Belarus - 71.1, Kazakhstan - 76.4, and Kyrgystan - 40.7 [16]. However, the Internet still is not dominating news vehicle in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan [14].

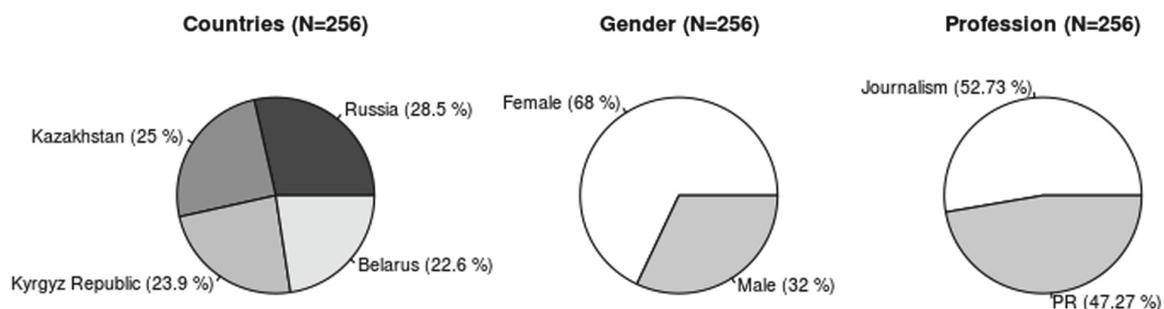
Also, there is a lack of empirical studies of messenger applications [22]. We were able to find only one statistical research of the instant messaging about Telegram. This study showed that 77% of Telegram’ users are persons of 18–34 years old, and, in terms of geography, Telegram is mostly Russian messenger application [29]. The countries of the Eurasian Economic Union have common patterns in mass media development, having noticeable influence from Russian

mass media and IT companies and forming a new, united media market [5]. However, Belarus became a visible part of IT-business been able to develop such successful projects like Viber messenger application. Unfortunately, there is a huge gap between academic studies and recent developments in messengers in all four countries. The social network services have been in focus of empirical researches, but not of the messengers' applications and their use in mass communication.

### 3 Research Design

The main goal of the research was to determine the place and role of messengers in the professional communications of journalists and public relations specialists in the post-Soviet space. The research project has united four researchers from four countries currently affiliated with the research and teaching institutions in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. These countries constitute the core of the Eurasian Economic Union. The work was performed as a research initiative to invite attention to the messenger applications as a tool of professional communication for journalists and public relations specialists. This research project could be treated as a pilot study. The authors from Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia have united their efforts to track down recent developments in mass communication practices in the post-Soviet region.

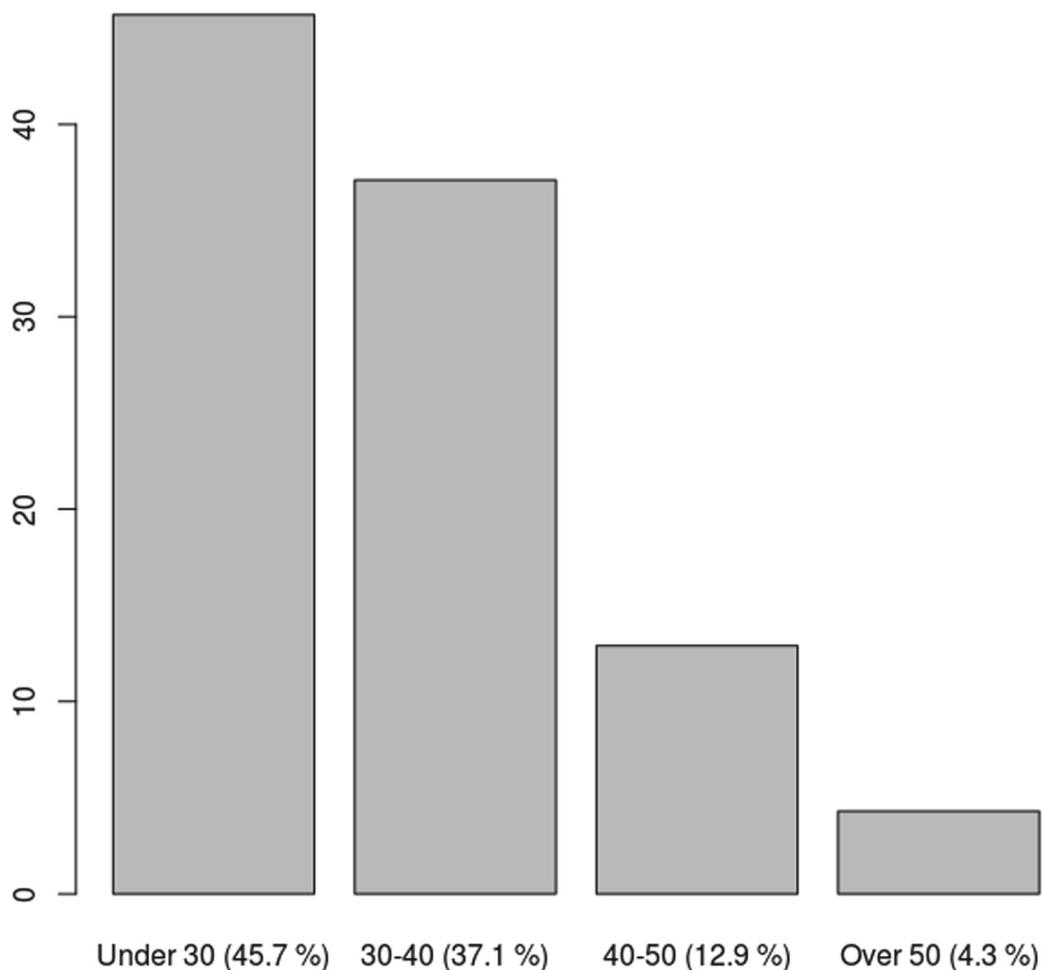
Empirical data were obtained by the authors in four countries of the Eurasian Economic Union: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia (see Fig. 1). The survey involved 256 experts in journalism and PR, who have both at least three years of experience in the field and the experience of using instant messengers in professional communication. Thus, our experts, the journalists and the PR-practitioners, have had solid job records and expertise in instant messaging. An expert poll, in this case, is one of the few methods that allow conducting an effective study that has both qualitative and quantitative indicators [6]. We also should mention a great deal of interest from our experts who participated in the research.



**Fig. 1.** Poll of experts: overview, N = 256, December 2017.

Since the subject has not been really investigated in the scientific literature, the study has to have an exploratory design, aiming to draw a general picture. This leads to the formation of several research questions:

1. What messenger applications do the journalists and the public relations specialists use in professional communication?
2. Why do they use messengers?
3. How widely stickers and gifs are used to express emotions?
4. Is there a noticeable automation of professional communications with the help of bots?
5. How widely used audio and video messages in instant messengers?
6. What is the role of the messengers in professional communication: basic, auxiliary, or insignificant?
7. What about the prospects for using instant messengers in journalism and PR?

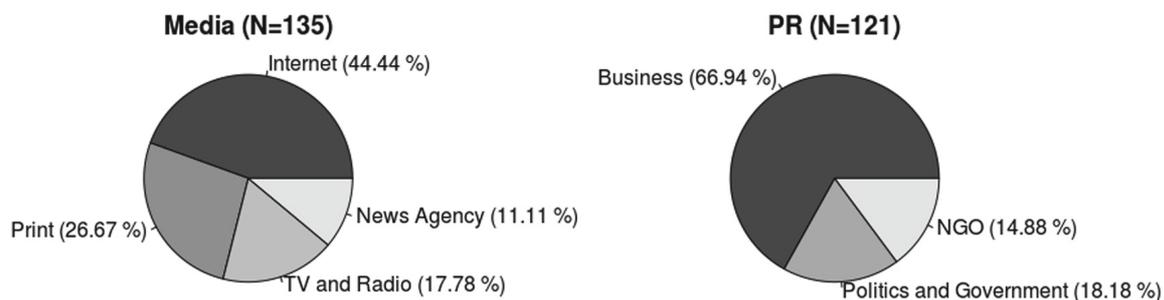


**Fig. 2.** Experts' age distribution, N = 256, December 2017

In December 2017 we conducted interviews with experts. The questionnaire included 19 questions. The first part of the questionnaire (Q1–Q7) intended to

find traditional socio-demographic parameters of the sample. It included questions about age, gender, etc. The second part of the questionnaire (Q8–Q19) was created in order to answer the research questions. It included open-ended questions, closed-ended questions, and semi-closed questions, which allowed experts to contribute new information to the research. Not all questions from the questionnaire were actually asked in face-to-face or telephone interviews. For example, Q1 “Country of residence” was obvious and was marked by researchers automatically. The same reason applied for Q2 (“Gender”). The Q14 was about bots’ usage in PR and journalism and was asked only if experts mentioned in the previous Q13 that he or she “is actually familiar with cases of bots usage in professional communication”. That allowed us to keep the timing of interviews in the period of 15–20 min.

The analysis of the poll of experts shows that all four countries have almost equal representation at the level of one-fourth of the sample. Female experts constitute 68% of the sample which is normal for the field of journalism and PR. As we anticipated, the experts tend to be young (see Fig. 2) due to the research design. The older people get, the less probable they use smartphones, which are necessary to use to get into the sample. Also, it reflects the youth of the PR and contemporary journalism in the post-soviet countries.

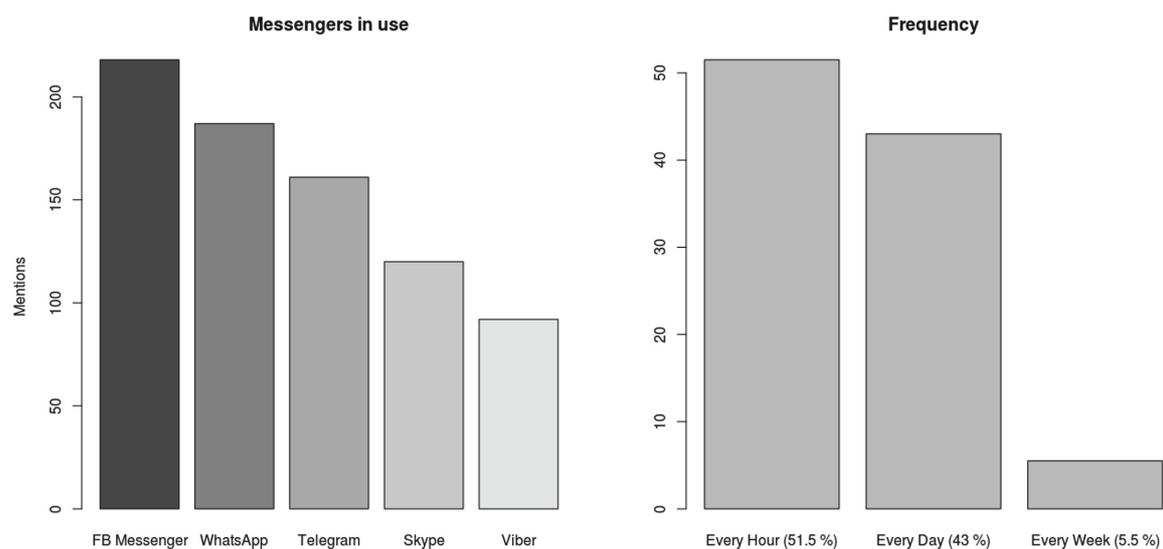


**Fig. 3.** Experts’ professional occupation, N = 256, December 2017

Q6 and Q7 were asked to control sample diversity in terms of job occupation (see Fig. 3). Analysis of job’ distribution revealed that the sample is rather diversified. The journalists tend to have more jobs in Internet media (44%), which is the common trend for the last 2 decade. The PR practitioners tend to occupy business and industry organizations (67%), which is also “usual” for international practice.

## 4 Research Results and Limitations

According to our data the most popular messenger application among our experts is the Facebook messenger (see Fig. 4). The second most popular is WhatsApp, which make the Facebook with two messengers to look like a winner. In order to verify that information we asked an open-ended question about the



**Fig. 4.** Messengers in use and frequency of usage by the experts, N = 256, December 2017

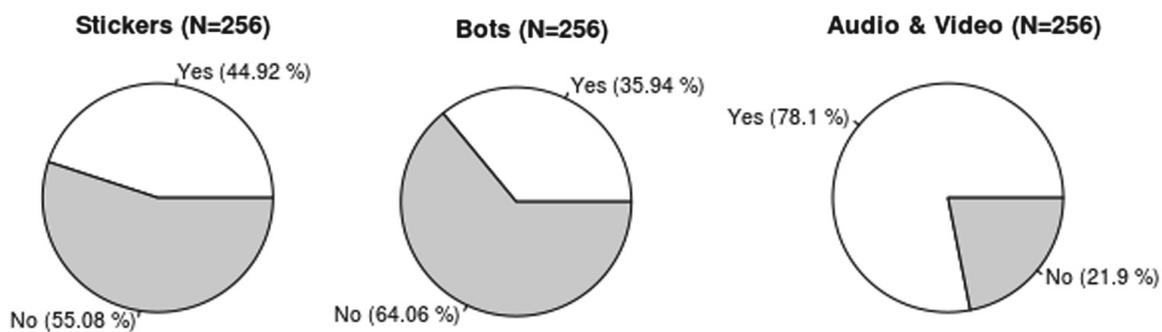
best messenger application, not the most used, but preferred by the experts personally. 231 answers had been recorded on the Q9, 25 experts refused to answer. The answers have revealed that Telegram earned 85 voices, WhatsApp - 82, FB - 37, Viber - 21, Skype - 5, and Signal had 1. Obviously, PR practitioners and journalists have to use messengers applications which their clients are using. That is why FB Messenger and WhatsApp, having the biggest number of users in the world, are more popular. At the same time, in terms of perspective, the Telegram has chances to become more popular as Skype has more chances to be even less popular than today.

Purpose of use	Number of mentions
To communicate with journalists/PR specialists	223
To communicate with the sources of information	202
To subscribe to the news-feeds	136
To invite people to the special events	96
To run a news channel or to spread the information	86
To demonstrate personal ability to handle the gadgets	11
To communicate with colleagues at work	11

**Fig. 5.** Purposes to use messengers in professional communication by the experts, N = 256, December 2017

The questionnaire also had a question about frequency of messengers' usage in professional communication. The members of the expert poll tend to use instant messaging very often (see Fig. 4). Only 5.5% of them do not communicate on a daily bases. It looks like the messenger applications are really inclusive, producing a new form of communication dependency.

Q11 was asked in order to understand for what purposes instant messaging is used in PR and journalism. The experts were able to mark every possible answer and to suggest their own. Results are shown in Fig. 5. It is very interesting that journalists and PR specialists have placed necessity to communicate with each other at first. The other interesting thing was the attitude toward subscribing/running news feed or spreading/receiving the information. Our experts tend to be more passive than active in this activity.



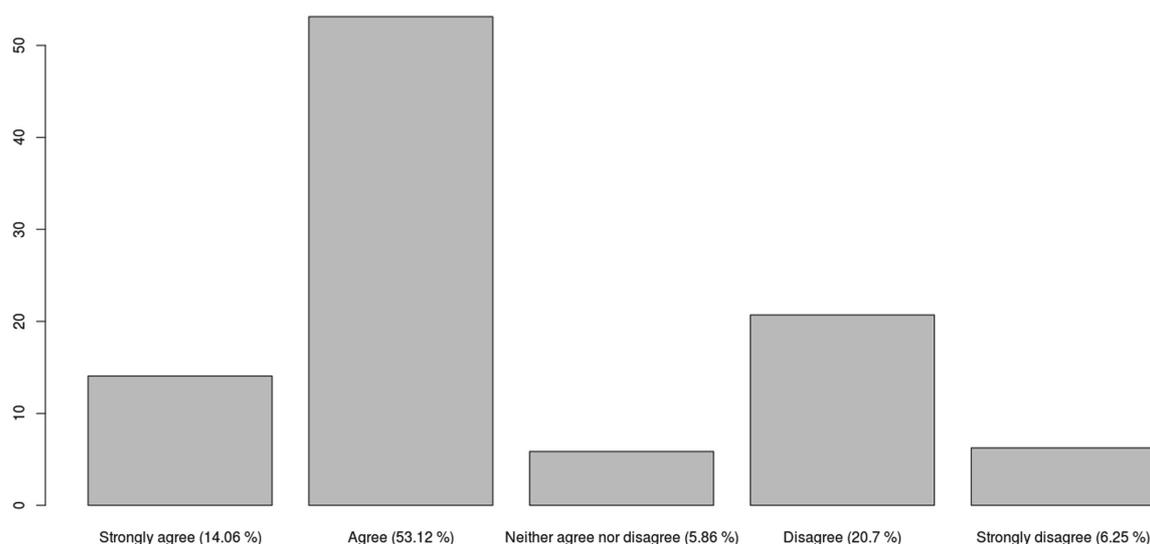
**Fig. 6.** Usage of stickers, bots, video- and audio-files by the experts, N = 256, December 2017

Next questions (Q12–Q15) were about practical features of instant messaging: stickers, bots, audio- and video-files (see Fig. 6). Only 44.92% of the experts are using stickers, 35.94% actually noted bots in PR and journalism. That numbers are not so high as it could be expected. However, our experts are using audio- and video-files transmission at the level of 78.1%.

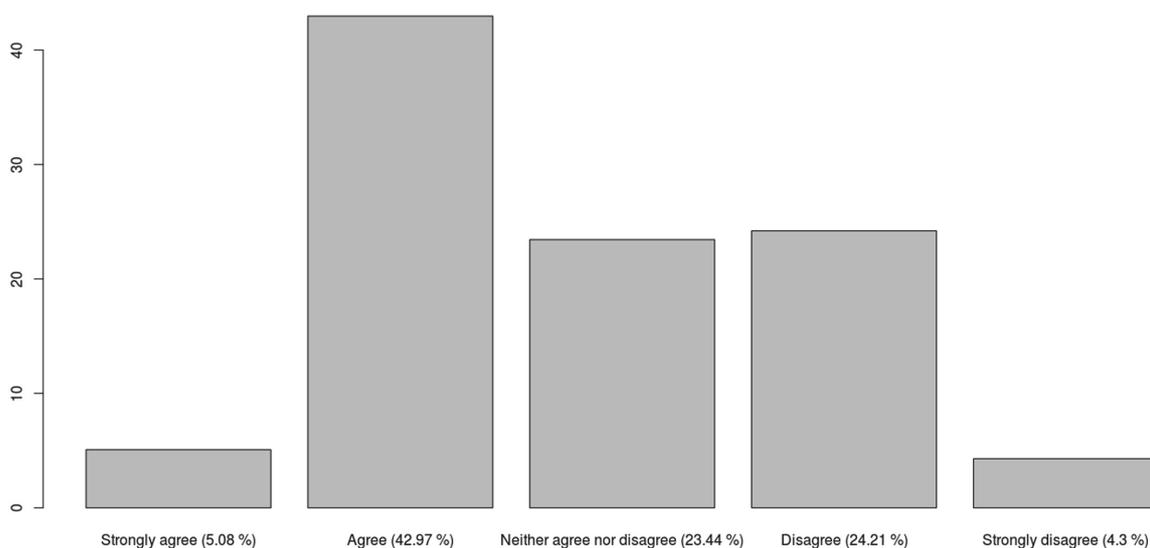
One of the most important results of our study deals with the experts' opinion about the current role of the instant messaging in PR and journalism. 67.18% of the experts think that “messengers have practically replaced telephones and SMS-messages as a tool of professional communication” (Fig. 7). This reflects an opinion about the important role of messengers as a tool for professional communication. Also, these data underline the importance of instant messengers studies and immediate necessary to include the topic in teaching courses.

However, when we asked about the future of messengers comparing to the social media, the experts were not so sure (Fig. 8). Less than 50% thought that “Messengers will be more important than social media in PR and journalism in a short future”. The number of unconfident experts rose from 5.86% to 23.44%. That tells us about difficulties to predict the development of the situation or about conservativeness of the experts.

The last question we asked (Q19) was about the future of instant messaging in PR and journalism. It was an open-ended question. The experts were supposed



**Fig. 7.** “Messengers have practically replaced telephones and SMS-messages as a tool of professional communication” (Q16), N = 256, December 2017



**Fig. 8.** “Messengers will be more important than social media in PR and journalism in a short future” (Q18), N = 256, December 2017

to express their opinions freely. Almost all experts expressed an opinion that “messenger applications will be more applied in a short future” due to their usability, mobility, privacy, and security.

According to our data, the most popular messenger application among respondents is the Facebook messenger, and the second most popular is WhatsApp, but most of the respondents personally would prefer Telegram. However, it must be mentioned that there is a significant country difference in messengers popularity (See Fig. 9). Belarus has the most peculiar situation: the WhatsApp is relatively less popular there, as the Viber is being used significantly. In Russia, the Telegram messenger is the most popular application, presumably, for

the reason of security. At the same time, the Facebook messenger is used proportionally equal in all four countries. We were not able to discover that this differences of messengers' usage have impacted on other results.

<b>Messenger application</b>	<b>Average (%)</b>	<b>Belarus (%)</b>	<b>Kazakhstan (%)</b>	<b>Kyrgyzstan (%)</b>	<b>Russia (%)</b>
Facebook messenger	54.5	-3.5	-2.5	+2.5	+3.5
WhatsApp	46.75	-30.75	+14.25	+8.25	+8.25
Telegram	40.25	-9.25	-4.25	-12.25	+25.75
Skype	30	+3	+1	0	-4
Viber	23	+32	-16	-14	-2

**Fig. 9.** Messengers in use by the experts: average and country difference, N = 256, December 2017

This study, however, had certain methodological and sample issues. We tried to extend our previous study among the borders of only one country and raise the level of generalizability of our results. Our study reduces the possibility of applying our findings in other cultural contexts. Also, the size of samples of experts from four countries presents another limitation. Finally, an expert study approach, chosen for this study, gives only one view of reality. A qualitative and quantitative follows up seem the necessary next-step and would shed more light on the instant messaging usage in PR and journalism.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

Messenger applications integrate people into the networked communication in the real-time environment, set new trends in media consumption and form new directions for media development in the digital environment. A smartphone is already a universal media device and takes the most important place in the system of multi-platform news consumption. Mobile technologies influence the work of journalists and PR specialists. The data obtained show that journalists and PR specialists in four counties choose similar strategies for using instant messengers. In any case, it is obvious that modern technologies significantly change the creative activity of journalists and PR specialist. In particular, the respondents noted that instant messaging and mobile Internet require constant training of new technologies in multi-platform communication. Technological changes demand new tools for creating content in the digital environment. However, we come to the conclusion that many media and PR companies have not yet developed a clear strategy of presence in messengers, acting more by trial and error, which is confirmed by empirical data. In any case, there is a new challenge, accelerated by the digital transformation, to present content in modern

mobile formats. Today, the editorial offices of traditional media and PR agencies follow the audience which sets the agenda.

The study has its controversial issues. For example, it is unclear how far will go a tendency then Internet media sites are replaced by social platforms and messenger applications such as Facebook, VKontakte, YouTube, Instagram, Viber, Telegram, etc. Social network services are dominating the Internet. However, messenger applications already compete with them. So, the academic community will have to discuss and study the next big competition between social networks and messengers. Some experts today consider Telegram and Viber as “new social networks”. It is unclear how the audience will prefer to receive information: from the media or from other sources like social network services and messenger applications. A promising direction of research also includes the bots as one of the kind of robotic journalism and PR communication. The typological characteristic of channels in instant messengers deserves the attention of scientists. So far, the question remains unsolved, what is the reliability of the information in the channels in Telegram and the criteria for its verification. The advertising capabilities of instant messengers have also not been studied here. A separate block of research can be devoted to the psychological aspects of the use of instant messengers, in particular, the formation of dependence on these services. Also, the linguistic features of communications in messengers can become an object of empirical research. Interesting data could also be provided by a survey of adolescents and young people in order to study how they use instant messaging and mobile internet.

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